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BUNCH!

David R. Bunch
ii

(1925-2000)

Introduction by
Barry N. Malzberg

Broken Mirrors Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts

To Beatrice,
for all the work, the priceless help, and
forever-unwavering faith in me –

To Phyllis Elaine and Velma Lorraine,
my two daughters, my two best other-selves,
my finest accomplishments –

And last, but never least:
To Quentah Belle,
my sister, who sees, even in the darkest evidence,
that the world is good and Heaven awaits –

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"Control" appears here for the first time.

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Here They Be!: Century's End, Fortune's Wheel and the Knight of Doleful Countenance

Consider the uses and allusions of metaphor. When I say "metaphor" here I am not talking of your basic freshman English Joe-Christmas-is-the-surrogate-for-Jesus-Christ-down-there-in-darkest-Mississippi; I am not talking either of Flannery O'Connor's dark-suited, dreary prophets and messengers of tongues wandering in and out of the waiting rooms or gasoline stations of the insistent prairie, looking for a young composition student toward whom they can fix glittering eye. Am not speaking of the substitution-phenomena (Gerard Manley Hopkins is filled with this) in which bird-breasts, penis-birds, clangs and gongs of churchly summons and copulation come down amidst and amongst the eaves of the House of Seven Gables which incidentally does not quite function as the Pillars of Wisdom.

No, dig further, discard the earnest themes and observations of the half-enlightened and dig even further, into that moist and clangorous territory in which the things half-hidden, half-dead or alive like the century itself cling to one another in the timorous spaces of their hiding, disclosing to one another their soft and essential secrets, posterity's own dank confidence amongst the flora and fungi of the least known... it is here where Bunch resides, the Thing Itself (as Wallace Stevens, that exhibit A in the freshman's own catalogue of posture and woe might have put it), those robots and mutants, dire children and half-cracked servants of the ancient mystery whispering their horrid confidences to one another in the true language of post-technology, that language which has moved beneath (because it cannot pass beyond) the utterances of machines to breathe the pure, high ardor of the inconsequent

and the maimed, the breathless and the damaged under the tormenting creak of those technological excellences which to the visible eye, serenely studying the last convulsions of this difficult and disastrously skewed civilization can hardly be said to exist at all.

Ah, granting voice to the unspeaking! giving words and lips divine to the underbelly of the beast, the detritus of human woe crushed under by the sparkling metal and joints of that machinery! Bunch is in the center of that old artistic confidence game, the heavy-breathing and insistent analogy of those who have survived the assaults of chronology and function to get into what they themselves would call the Metaphysics Racket. Here is the Metaphysics Racket in the time of the disposal of infants: infanticide is just another nasty, sweaty, dirty job with its union compensations and union corruption, its union obligation and small union scams, all of it a hard and miserable business for an honest (or dishonest!) workingman who would rather be in an easier detail, say, or given a crack at the kind of education which could have taken him from the front lines...but still, there are those infants to jumble up and you and Chuck and the crew have got to do it although not in a way that will make it too hot for the slower workers, the less murderously endowed. This isn't a piecework business, after all, this is straight time and you have to cover for all the workers. Here is the Metaphysics Racket while learning it at Miss Rejoy's, the anagram - get this! there are additional points for relating the anagram to the central custodial obsession which seems to trail through Bunch's work - pointing the way to a whorehouse turned slaughterhouse, a slaughterhouse disguised as some cat-house of the soul, all of it done in that half-cracked, half-anarchic, entirely *faux-naif* voice which is to those of us who have learned it at Miss Rejoy's such an American voice, the flat, de-toned accents of Bunch's midwest turned not so much toward an outpouring of language as its reverse, that compensating taciturnity, that drawled *a-yup!* of the heart when confronted by that for which there is possibly no language at all. Silence's true scatology, the insufficiency of sound for the martyred or functionally disabled; the slow arc toward *gravitas* and the extinction of light.

Not metaphor-as-replacement then, not your standard Joe-Christmas-is-Jesus and the farm-lady-in-REVELATION is Mary Magdelene but metaphor-as-the-real-stuff then; the aliens with their slack jaws and earnest expressions are the dangling and half-evinced humors of distemper which twist our guts at the least convenient time; the civil servants disposing of infants are not symbols of the departure-of-moral-consciousness-in-the-post-technological-state (that's a low C, Frank, it won't play in the provinces of the finals, take another ticket and get on line please) but are just that, civil servants administering civil service, the blind, unwinking eye of the technician then the last thing we see before the

plug is casually pulled, the machinery wheeled toward the wall, the bed kindly and indifferently creaked to a more perilous posture as we allow our consciousness to slide away. A practical consciousness, this, something uniquely American, Bunch not as Jeremiah but as an earnest and half-sacrificial Mr. Fixit of the Soul, getting down there amidst the dangling wires and looped, missed connections of our technological pity, nails in his mouth, practical Mr. Fixit cap jauntily on his cartographer's head as he gets down there and ever so earnestly tries to pull things together. Working out his maps for the Air Force, tracing encroach of cumulus or tempest from the far West, noting the small, deadly abscissa in the distance that might (or might not) turn into tornadoes, huge floods, sheer excavations of civilization if allowed their fullest expression, Bunch must have had some insight into the true nature of the time: *everything was weather*, and science fiction was weather forecast, watch those thunderheads in the southwest, try to ignore the low pressure abutting from Canada, fix upon the sturdy, virginal layers of ozone laid out in banners of sky to protect us from the more dramatic – but hopefully shielded – fates. Moving from one Bunch confidence to the next, all of them little confidence tricks whispered with dread speed and style in your shell-pink ear as, rube's journey, you wandered your way through the setpieces of the carnival, looking for the most honest-looking game to which to take the children, maybe win a bear or at least not make an utter fool of yourself, listening to those little voices from the dark corners of the carnival under that high up blue sky full of spinning birds and creatures, you are given cause to think that you are being enveloped by your future, that you are being carried pell-mell, posthaste into some clear, crazy apprehension of the way it will be when all has departed but the clear, gleaming knives of technology but of course this is not the case. It is another case, one of too much sun and distraction, one which has to do with false handholds, the whining of the kids, the pressure of the bladder against the bouncing wallet and the vague fear that there will be no pissoir in this cheap carnival where you would want to risk your frail self to the meteorites or lightning bolts of a cartographer's sense of possibility. No, it is not the future which these confidences are urging but rather the past; your own childhood nights to which you are being carried.

Further and further back the voices urge you in their cracked, half-dumb, half-alive, wholly convincing state of confluence; further back you are being taken to pure cracked corn of childhood credulity (you can believe anything when you are very young, when the covers are adjusted tight, when mommy and daddy are looming presences in the hall, capable, you understand now, of anything), further and further toward the time of disposal of infants which common knowledge and your own gray coporeality tells you is not at all possible but which the

voices at Bunch's carnival insist remains until this moment. Pure Americana, pure insistence, carrying you back and back, not Bradbury's shiv-ery, spun-pink bunny rabbit landscapes here but the *real* thing, the thing itself, the thing of ghosts and shadows which comprises the canvas behind Moderan, and which, with the decor stripped, will then and necessary gobble you up, eat you from head to toe, expel you quite shorn of history and sensibility, benumbed and speechless then on the hard floor of the millenium, all apocalyptic promises removed, waiting then for the civil servants to come and take you out with the rest of the garbage, the rest of the failures, the rest of the irrelevant, human waste which stood only so temporarily and with such comic earnest, procreative lust against the truer, truly truths of a universe with something deeper than weather, darker than guilt to concern it; wait for the technicians to clean away that last, irrelevant protoplasm and diffidence so that not the machines – remember, this is not a metaphor, this is the real, realer, truly truth – but the thunderheads may have their way. Shantih shantih.

Barry N. Malzberg
1992: New Jersey

The College of Acceptable Death

It was twelve uneasy little-war years after a peace that I set up my very successful College of Acceptable Death. The courses were all jam-packed. We did it mostly by demonstration....

We opened with people slicing close copies of dachshunds nose-first through standard baloney slicers, and over it all was the sound of agony from little things being squeezed, like mice in the grip of anvils, and cats were being sat upon by heavy-hauling truck tires. Our slogans blasted the room, in hot compelling neons, and mottoes by the dozens danced and advised death. A butcher's case in a corner displayed fine meat cuts and a sign saying, "Don't forget that Ferdinand once had stomach trouble from daisies, switched at horseflies in long summer afternoons and waited for cows that never came to the old watering tank by the hedge trees." Then a long, bright sirloin was held aloft by two rubber hands in the display, and those hands kept flexing the steak in a most lascivious manner to the tune of a catchy butcher-shop refrain that was saying:

Ferdinand is peaceful now,
Ferdinand is peaceful;
No more the horseflies worry him,
Ferdinand is peaceful.
He forgets the deceitful cow!

"WE WILL BEGIN THE CLASSES! ORDER IN THE CLASSROOM!" I yelled through all the speakers my room had. I danced up and down, rumbled my hair and was ready to lacerate myself with sharp pencils to let my class see that I was really sincere and that I honestly wanted to

begin the instruction. As they grew quiet, calmly I stepped aside on the big stage while my assistants wheeled in the fire show.

A copy of an oil-soaked man strode quickly into a furnace that was all fire-glass sides, and as he exploded to cherry flame his teeth swept a white line of agony through barely parted lips, and when his hair vanished in a sudden poouf a grimace of utter pain suffused his death-built grin. The shrieks came over the loudspeakers so that the ears of all were filled with the feel of burning, and when near the end of his going out by fire he got up from where he had fallen, and walked – with his flaky feet charring to bone stubs – across to beat at a small and hopeless door, the shrieks of the class audience mixed with his crying from the speakers until there was nothing but the horror and feel of ultimate inescapable pain in the room. Still we were schooling our people, and that was good. OH REALITY....

Next we wheeled in a windmill-bladed chamber that was glass on all four sides, and we parked it across from a knife thrower who had a dark moustache and a grin of cold malignancy, while his look of confidence and the cool way he constantly flexed his long card-trick hands seemed to bespeak a deadly skill that was unarguable. When a lecture-prop child got up from deep in the glass-sided chamber and started to run along in a peaceful way with his red and pink striped play-more ball among the windmills, we filled the place with blades at the press of a switch. The windmills turned until they blurred and vanished, and oscillating they hacked the child to juicing-chunks and strips in his innocence, jig-jag, back-and-forth, slice-slice, up-and-down. All but his head. And the red and pink striped play-more ball. These bounced around among the oscillating windmills and gave direction to an otherwise almost invisible white performance, and gave the class audience, I believe, a kind of wild sick hope for the child's head and the ball. But I need not tell you. You know what happened. Yes! A small round window opened in the glass-sided chamber. And he started throwing those long stiletto blades – wup, wup, wup, at the child's head and the ball. He never missed. When he had a dozen or so slim blades nearly buried, expertly placed, in the child's head and the ball, he stood unwinding his slim black moustache, which he had trained to spell Hah. Smiling and bowing low to his audience – my class – which had collapsed now and lay wailing along the floor, he seemed especially malignant. Was death so bad?

Well, we were getting them ready.

As a kind of cool relief from the warm action of the fire-chamber, the windmill blades and the hissing hot stilettos, not to mention the sliced dachshunds, the mice squeezed, the cats sat upon and Ferdinand waiting for cows, we gave the audience a cold show of suffering in the snow. In a month that chilled like November we had red hearts along

drifted snow-tall lanes until the chiseled setting looked like a misplaced midmonth of February misadventure. But it was not. It was not. It was what we wanted. As the class audience picked itself up from where it had collapsed from the unrelieved horror of the windmill blades and the knifethrower we loosed the snow scene to action. Young cardboard people with hot unthinking gestures ran barefoot in the chiseled snow-lanes to the heart places and found them to be not warm and meaningful hearts, not even boxes of candy. They found them to be what they looked to be, cold red paper hearts in a snowdrift. But with one important addition. The hearts were backed with generous portions of sponges. And when hot young people clasped the red-heart sponges to the heart regions of their own agitated breasts there began the terrible action of acids thawing. Sometimes there would be the almost instantaneous sound of explosion, and a chest would blow four-windward and pat-pat to the snow, but more often it was just the slow action of acid eating and people clasping the red hungry gnawing hearts, unable to fling them away until a hole that was almost half a chest big gaped under unbelieving faces. Then nerveless hands would drop the acid sponges, and in the snow-tall lanes zombie faces went without a heart, without even their own heart, having gambled for a heart's gain and known instead a heart's loss in some strange terrible deficit. And they grew old there, so very old there – after the time of their hot young hopes – plucking the cast-down hearts up hopefully, so very hopefully, wan faces, grief-hallowed faces, ransacking the faceless snow for something salvageable in the heart-loss land. And a low moan began in the audience and grew in volume and rose and fell, eddied and swirled, like a wind with strange gaps in it, and looking at the tortured aspects of the class audience there with their own heart's torture, victims of the acid-eating times, one was somehow reminded of a speckled scream. "That too?" some shrieked. "That too, in Deathland? I had been promised to burn quietly. Oh, everlastingly to burn for sins, he told us, but I thought quietly in agony in really honest flames, lying like some grease bag frying loglike never to consume. The acid burning of this heart country I could not – " Then the eyes bulged, stricken, terrible, out of the whitened faces. This was death! finality! they suddenly realized. The audience seethed, lashed at itself, fell down in terror, pounded along the walls.

In the afternoon we lectured to them quietly of the horror of man-in-passage. We tried to be calm, reasonable. We had stirred them enough, we felt, with our drama of the morning, and we knew how their hearts must be lunging now in clammy stricken fear. I could hear those hearts, hear them from the rostrum when I listened, hear their pud-pud-pud. Grimly I pursued my course dispassionately for their instruction. A sane calm view was the gift, the great gift....

Then the glass man came on all covered with U's and you you you you you. His inner workings were in order there to see; his brain was a book where every thought could be read. And over him hovered a tremendous snowbeard that hung between two balls that were bigger than medicine balls, and these were the eyeballs. And though the beard blew to and fro in casual indifferences, the eyes never left the you-man. Sometimes the beard would project two hands, white as itself, and flick up hinged parts of the you-man so the eyes could better see. More often the white hands flicked up the hinged top of the you-man's head so the brain there could be read like a book. A record high in the loft of the building kept hissing softly, "God sees – God sees – God sees – YOU." The you-man tried to get away. He ran and hid in a corner under some paper sacks, dissembling his thoughts. But a white hand casually flipped him uncovered and a medicine ball eyeball crawled in to have a better look while a record played, "You can't get away from the eyeballs of God, you can't, you can't." The audience – some of them – tittered, and then, suddenly realizing they had tittered at God and God's eyeballs, they fell down in a sick fainting and tried to hide. But of course they could not hide. We told them that. They should've known they could not hide from the God they loved and his eyeballs.

A pink light came on in the white building; a pink glowing softer than a June rose petal played over all the faces. They had just risen from a prostrate display of fear, so the pink made a nice show on their white blanched skins. Their wildly heaving breasts and overall demeanor of greatest terror told us that they could never face death on the terms that had been established. But they did not have to. It was a trick! We wheeled out the big fat zeros, the ovals of soft gray rubber. We let a fan gently waft these up and down and about. We had them come to rest on soft beds of gray rubber flowers. We had big rubber graves, gray rubber graves, soft rubber graves – softness, softness, softness. Softness was the keynote. A record gently played:

Death is softness, softness, softness;

Softness is death, death, death –

soft soft soft death....

The faces showed puzzlement and a straining need to believe. "Believe!" a voice shrieked. "Believe!" It was my voice. "The terrors you have seen – the flames, the blades, the hearts' acid – were not of death. They were of life. These things are you – NOW! YOUR LIVES! And the terrible eyeballs watching around the terrible beard – they are you – your thoughts, nothing else. You made them. Imagine such a contraption being interested in you zeros! Ha ha." Then a record began to play:

Come on little zeros,

Get your death, get your grass,

Get your rubber leaves;

Blow like a bubble to your big soft
Rubber graves.
Lie down. Lie down in gray dark.
Lie down. Lie down.
Rest rest rest....

Like a great intake and outgo of some terrible bellows the breath of relief wheezed in that comforted room. They had seen the light, they had come to know the gyp, and working fast we were ready when they came. The whole room moved in concert for their ease. Across the stage, breaking on us like multicolored waves, they came. We touched the button that kicked the whole wall free back of the stage and they all flowed in to where a soft gray shimmer hovered in the air and an elusive blur made an ease-picture that was hard to describe. The million razor-thin chopper blades whirring just under the shimmer and in the ease-picture hard to describe diced them to liquid people, chopped them to super-fine, and while a record played a new light cemetery hit tune, they were all machine-packaged in zero bags for interment in the big gray zero graves back of our building.

Having graduated our class we took the next day off to recuperate, go fishing and to clean and repair our equipment. But the day after that....

In *the* Time of Disposal of Infants

There wasn't much we could do about it. Mostly we just did our job, which was to dump the cans and scoop up the sacks and the broken lamps and the pieces of chairs and the old picture walls and the kids and put it all in the back. Where the teeth were. Sometimes I would watch those long teeth come down, and sometimes I wouldn't. But mostly I WOULD, I guess, being a little sadistic, I suppose, as well as somewhat old-fashioned there in my smelly clothing. But I didn't enjoy it, not really. My knees would tremble and the sweat would bead out on my head when those long teeth would hook through the guts of the infants and their little tubes would squirt up, 'way up to the gray curved top of the inside of the vehicle and rest there a little while, pasted there with blood and dangling like raw red question marks or new snakes, and then fall into the general mix, and the big teeth would keep on and we would keep on dumping.

Well, it went like that for awhile this Saturday, we and the big gray truck and the big teeth out there trying to clean up back street, because the garbage and the trash and the kids had to be hauled on Saturdays the same as Mondays and Thursdays. Until we came to this one pit. It was in the rear of a big green cool looking house at the far side of a yard paved with milk-white blocks. From the house came the sound of artificial laughter and music and you knew the picture walls were on. And you could imagine them in there, probably only a man and a woman, of some indefinite age, not old and not young, both dressed in fine casual clothes, you could suspect, and in their soof-air chairs perhaps, gently rocking and being massaged and soofed. And perhaps there would be a fine dog, probably a dignified boxer, looking a little ridiculous on his

soof-air pillow, gently rocking and scratching and being soofed. And they would all be watching the Real-scene picture walls in a kind of detached way, the dog watching that section just for him where three-D dogs fought three-D cats and pulled their ears off, and the other two watching some sports program perhaps where a big man tore another big man to chunks and then jumped on them. And from ceiling, walls and floor would flood the gently twanging music, to give the whole setting a kind of unearthliness. In the background of it all would be this soft whirring and lispering in the walls of the house where all the engines and gauges were that kept this home at its artificial best.

It was at the pit back of this house on the hottest of all Saturdays in July that we encountered her. And it shocked us all – all three of us – me and Slot in back, who dumped it, and black Totter up front, who drove. She sat there, all of four, in her cool peach dress and her white sandals and her green hose, peering out from beneath a big pink straw hat that had a black band and a spray of made flowers on it. And she was clutching the very cleanest whitest little girl's purse that I have ever seen, which was all frilly and heartshaped and built to look like a valentine.

The situation to me seemed to call for a bit more than the usual hoisting and dumping. So I took the lead, Slot being so old that everything looks about the same to him, except more pay per hour, and that looks different, being his one desire. And Totter, slumping up front, filled with his own thoughts of pay glory I felt sure, probably saw no need to deviate. Anyway, I was the captain.

"Do your Seniors know you're out here?" I asked. (Kids don't have papas and mamas now in our town; they have Seniors.)

She looked out from the brim of her hat, and she had the darkest brown eyes that I have ever encountered, deep deep brown, close to black. "Yeh," she said, sullen and very resigned. "They said I'd have to go. Today. So I just dressed up and came out here to wait."

"Why," I stammered, "why – what's the matter? I don't understand." Usually if they kept them this long, they kept them.

"Let's don't talk about it," she said, very grown-up, but still sullen. "I'm just here to go along with the rest of it, so let's just do it."

"Well, if that's the way it is," I said, "of course we'll do it. We have our jobs to do, and anything in these pits is supposed to look like trash and garbage to us out here, with this big truck, trying to keep up the alleys for those fine cool homes up front. But still, we're human too, even if we do work and can't afford a house with picture walls and soof-air chairs and a big fat dog and house music. Why, I've had my old hundred-inch-screen color TV so long and my atomic thousand-record record player and my common ordinary old air-pet chairs that just rock by themselves, they don't soof, that I'm dogged if I'm not about ready to rouse out the union for a raise. But still, as I was saying, even if we

are just labor and don't have all the fine conveniences of your Seniors, we're human too." I'd talked more than I meant to, partly getting it off my chest as well as talking to her.

"Yeh," she said, brown-eyed gaze still sullen from under the hat. — "But what's all this conversation get us? G-4 will beat you if you don't rush." And she was right! We were Garbage-3 and we always had a friendly race with Garbage-4 on Saturdays to see who would get to count heads, before the whole thing went into the bleach-and-remold to be made into white paving blocks for the soiled sections of town. We just counted heads because usually only heads survived enough to be countable, little round skinned marbles bobbing about among the bread crusts and the stewed corn and the prune seeds and the bacon wrappers and the splintered chairs. "You're right," I said, "We've got to move. So please just be quick about it and tell me what made your Seniors decide you had to go. Was it Senior he or Senior she? And what happened?"

"Questions," she said, "just full of questions."

"Really, we've got to know," I said. "We can't just take one your size, even if you do say it's all right. We've got to have a logical reason. There's still the human values, you know. But I guess you're too young for that kind of talk."

"May be," she said.

All this time I was having a depressing picture of Garbage-4 streaking up to the last pit about fourteen pits ahead of us, and going in to the Garbage Grand-Captain about a half-hour ahead of us, and getting to count the heads this Saturday, its going on their record and all, and as senior member and leader of G-3 I didn't want that. I decided to tease and maybe get her to tell me more quickly what I needed to know. Desperately I tried to think of the things a mischevious four-year-old might do. "Bet you tried to sing with the picture walls," I teased, "and it was Senior she's favorite tenor."

"Nah," she said. "Didn't."

"Maybe you tried to scratch the dog and Senior he knew it'd upset poochie's routine, breaking into the rhythm of his soof that way."

"Nah," she repeated. "Didn't."

"Guess you must have kicked the mail cylinders when they came through the tube."

She looked at me stubbornly. "What's all this getting us?" she asked. "You're 'way wide — and I think I hear G-4," she needled me.

Truly desperate now I imagined I could hear a garbage engine gunning through Tenth Alley which, if so, meant they were nearly home. I looked at the big white yard with the sun making a million sparkles from the grains in the milk-white paving blocks and I took a wide wide chance, not half thinking. "Know what I bet you did?" I said. "I bet you marked in the show yard, with black chalk."

The way her brown eyes dipped, just dropped suddenly, like two brown marbles reeling over and down, I knew I had hit close to the nail. When her gaze came back up to dart at me from beneath her pretty hat, I knew she was going to talk. "Nah," she said, "didn't either. Just drew a little old hopscotch. With white chalk!"

So we loaded her in and tore on down the alley, dumping and racing now for dear life, determined to make up for lost time, if we could, and beat G-4 after all. And it was routine after that, just the usual infants in the chrome-steel garbage pits, squirming among the broken chairs and the stewed corn and the other refuse, because their Seniors had decided that really! here in the years of the pleasure peak, with all the nice gadgets to be enjoyed, no one could expect them to break into the time of joy days to go raising kids. And as luck would have it, we beat G-4. They had got a tooth jammed in something especially heavy, someone said it was a double sack of twins, and had been held up I guess nearly as long as we had been talking to the little miss. I had always thought we had the faster team and the better garbage rate, and I guess now about proved it. Because we got to count the infant heads this day, as we had for five Saturdays, straight running, or ever since I had captained the crew, and it went on our record, and soon we would be up for an achievement up, which, after all, was what we were all out for. And we counted one hundred and two little heads that day, and the big one with the deep deep brown eyes still visible through the garbage glaze made one hundred and three. And I think we were all a little tired from all that rushing.

"You know what?" I said to Slot and Totter, when we were all up in the cab and riding back to the headquarters of our particular garbage precinct, "this job takes a lot out of a man, out here in all kinds of weather, all this rushing and being timed and all. Let's just hustle the union out now for another general raise and not wait for our Achievement Up."

So we did it, and though we're only making twenty-five dollars an hour now, maybe that's about what the job's worth, and I guess we're happy as trash and garbage craftsmen, keeping an eye out for the human values, while achieving to the limits of our abilities here in our smelly clothes.

They Never Come Back From Whoosh!

I had seen them go in to the tall coal-colored place, but I had never seen one come back. Looking at it from far out, with my little pocko-scope viewer, I noted that soot hung over the building in long shreds and flapping ribbons and beating chunks of carbon like wings of bats, all jigging when the wind blew. And yet, it wasn't a somber structure. Not at all! Bright neons peeped from fluttering pieces of soot and winked on and off in a gay display of color through the black. Little figures danced through neon trickery, and all the signs said COME. Every piece of light, I learned later, was designed to attract people to this giant building called WHOOSH!

And they were going. I saw them go down carrying brief-cases — half-successes racing their papers down on foot. And I saw them go down in chrome-encrusted Cadillacs, successes riding the pomp and show of their methods to the tall coal-colored place. And I saw them race in all manner of other ways — men and women straining, with the bones of their intense nerve-bothered faces jutting whitely at the skin, and their eyes slightly upward toward one tall sign that said: DO NOT BE THE LAST TO WHOOSH!

I knew I could not be the first to WHOOSH! And perhaps there was not much immediate danger of my being the last, either. So I took my time and lounged down one day when the sun was all around in the autumn like buckets of poured gold and the flaking of the leaves. And I saw that WHOOSH! was a tall dark shaft that was not touched by the sun's gold, though the black ribbons and wings beat gaily enough and the neons smote at the sunlight in a silly way at noon. So I turned back from

half up a tree-gay hill, put three good leaves in my pocket, from three trees like good tall friends, loafed in the glade for awhile and then went, paying my respects to a nagging pang of guilt. Something must lie at WHOOSH!, some urgent project needing many men, else why were they all racing so, with their polished or battered brief-cases and the sun's gold changing to silver, or polished tin, on the rims of their eye corrections? Some big decision must hinge there, where the neons glanced indifference at sun and leaves. Perhaps I too was needed down there.

When I broke out of the trees and came to the bald place on the land, where the concrete was leveled and polished, whiter and harder than bone, for urgent speeding, I suddenly felt the yen toward WHOOSH! Strangely. Such a smooth fine place to GO! — Though I knew I had started too late to be first, for WHOOSH! had been there a long time, I now was determined not to be any later than I had to be, and I resolved to beat a few people. So I raced them leg to leg while the hours sped, yelled and raised my fists in impotent rage when the arrowing jets whined past, and I cursed for wheels when the wheeled entourages whammed by. I did not quite understand why I now wanted WHOOSH! so badly. But I did want it. Oh, strangely.

We raced all the rest of that day toward WHOOSH! That tall place beckoning with its dark fingers was farther away than we on foot had thought it. Those with gas-pushed wheels reached it shortly after noon. Those in the jets had been there a long time of course, some since earliest dawn. I reached it after sundown, slow and by myself, a tired one coming in to no welcome and silent bandstands. Neons once more were dancing and jabbing into the night.

Something pulled me and I went down a chute in the dark. One small blood-colored spot glittered far away at the end of this trough I slid down. When I hit the blood-colored spot, green lights winked on in a basement where a little man sat eating a sandwich of soot held between something glittering and white like porcelain, or something made from snow. He was hollowed into it with his face far as his sooty grimed ears.

"Uhhh!" he grunted and struggled to empty his mouth. "Been expecting you," he finally said. "Heard one man talked to the leaves this afternoon, strolled leisurely in a grassy glade, picked a few reminders of a beauty that has passed and then came here with reluctance. Do you have them, by any chance?"

I remembered the leaves I had picked, so I pulled them out. "That'll get you a little talk and delay," he said, taking the leaves, "instead of the usual quick-whammo. Very unusual, your behavior. Almost unhuman, by modern yardsticks, and that's a fact. — Besides, it's my eating time, and perhaps that's the real reason why you'll get to wait. They're all waiting and piling up."

"I came to WHOOSH!" I said, "to see what I could see. I didn't come to show my leaf collection. Nor to swap riddle-talk."

"Never mind," he said, "never mind. You'll get to wave your little part like bat wings in a wind. We're building up the upper left of the structure now. You're just in time to go out there. But excuse me! I have to see to my ice."

So he went away, and I sat on a green stool that was really a black stone cylinder turned green by the lighting. When he came back he explained that the ice he had spoken of was his bath for tonight. "I stay pure," he said, "and clean too, here below the soot. I don't look like people imagine, and I don't get hot. I take ice showers and keep cool with water I've distilled once, boiled twice, and frozen three times. I'm not the devil, but I'll push the button to WHOOSH! anybody. Satan's in another department. Evaluation's his game. Of course he gets his work done too. Steadiest man we've ever had. Also the busiest!"

I didn't know what to say.

"My boy," he continued, "I'm sure glad you came. But picking those three leaves before you came here, and loafing around in that grassy glade, set you a little apart. So I'll have to let you watch the operation a bit before you'll be ready to go and do your part out there in that build-up. Oh sure, you'll get to go. You did come to us." I felt my hair get to its feet. I was shaking.

The chunk of basement we sat on became an elevator car and we dropped down two more floors to where the big fans blew and the fire and gases mixed. Other little men, who were "carbon" copies of my little man, had their furnaces under control. Some were shut down for lunch and some were just stoking their fires for the big night delivery. "We run this place twenty-four hours a day," the little man said, "and we wish for twenty-six. We stagger our lunch periods. Gads, but they're really behind on their work here. So many people needing the fire!" Then he started working his job. A hole opened in the wall when he pressed a switch, and the people came on down. I saw surprise in every imaginable form in that interval when the bodies broke from the hole and pumped across on a powerful jet of air to where the big fan smacked them into the heat. "As hot as heat can get, that's our standard at WHOOSH! It isn't really enough of what they deserve, these people. But what more can one do?"

"Hey!" I yelled, "I've seen enough."

"You mean you're ready for the chimney?"

"I want to go back. It's so different from what I thought."

He went on working his job and the bodies were whisking across to the blaze. "When they come to WHOOSH! we expect them to mean it," he said. "If you go now you can get in on that build-up about top-high

on the left. If you go tomorrow we may have to let you flip your little particles of all-that-remains somewhat nearer the ground."

"I DON'T CARE!"

He was so surprised he almost fouled up the jet belt with a hundred bodies riding. But when he got delivery going again he said, shaking his head, "You're really breaking the pattern. First you pick those leaves and observe nature a bit. You lounge around. Then you walk and run down here and don't ride any wheels or wings. Obviously you're not with it, not by today's standards. Unhuman! almost. And now you don't seem to care if you don't make that top-floor build-up with your death's carbon! — Let's try something funny."

So he stopped delivery until there was just a trickle of bodies. And then only one. It was a blood-distended man, fat, with a brief-case which said a name and a rank in a jumbo enterprise. "Sir," said the little furnace tender of WHOOSH! to this big-wheel jumbo man, "if you'd prefer, you can come back some other time. Just forget business for awhile, let your blood settle a bit and you'll last for some time far hence. But of course I can't promise you that later you'll get in on that carbon build-up high on the left when we whoosh! you. You might have to take a lower floor and flap your final remainders there, ha ha." The jumbo wheel glared chairman-of-the-board and unconsciously reached for top-o'-the-heap cigars. Then he cleared his throat, and his heavy blood-bothered jowls got redder and then white. He didn't say a word, but anyone could see that he, even in the modern structure of death, would be unhappy about accepting a lower rung. So the little man whammowhooshed him and then turned to me.

"Get out!" he yelled. "And don't come back until you're ready to act like you belong here." Then he said confidentially, "Don't tell them where you've been, ever, because no one ever really comes back from WHOOSH! — the place where greed and speed get whammowhooshed. That is, no one comes back if he's ever really been here, in his heart. — Oh sure, it's the quickest way to go to hang with the rest of the soulless carbon, to flutter-flutter the long wait in a kind of foreverish grand nothing. It's the surest way to ride in that black monument to this soul-sacked world that hurries down here, about as meaningful as smoke and dust from a burning mountain of coal, about as beautiful as a desert ocean of sand. But you, I know, came against your will with these, and just out of curiosity. Nothing wrong with healthy curiosity." Then he handed me the bright leaves that he had held all that time crumpled in a grimy paw. "GET OUT!" he yelled, pointing at some stairs.

Just before I disappeared around a turn in the stairs I looked back, and I could tell by the little smile that chipped his soot-caked face this furnace tender of WHOOSH! was happy to have talked with me, a kind of different "human failure."

That High-up Blue Day That Saw the Black Sky-train Come Spinning

The endless sky held high-up that day; it was a high-blue time. There seemed a tremendous amount of area out there from which to expect danger, if that is the way your mind chose to track. Two old wise-men in their whiskers and phlegm and rancor, being not far from death and they knew it, having done the terrible arithmetic over and over and over to arrive at the small balance left, had concocted a rumor. I think, in many cases, those who are near death wish for some holocaust to go with their demise, that big Long Dark being too lonely alone, much too fierce to face singly, entirely too real to go alone to in only their little thin armor to battle the last Big Dragon. They wish for a general disaster, maybe the end of all things even, to make company, its being for them the end of it, certainly. Unless religious. Unless giddy. Unless unduly hopeful. Unless given to fantastic imaginings that becloud the terrible urgency of the issues. But these two old wise-men were none of these at all when not drunk, and all they could find relief in when sober was drink, usually cheap wine, or beer which is cheap, and then they were somewhat giddy, and maybe even religious. Almost certainly they became reformers then.

YES! One day, about a week before this high-blue day of our story, in all sobriety they had hit on this terrible scheme. On a small dirty cob-webbed press in the basement of a friend long gone (from drink and unsuitable quarters, such as under frosty bridges at night without blankets) they would print in the thousands the warning. After having the idea, they repaired to a low-dive tavern to work on details and as they became more and more drunk they argued. Long and loud they did dis-

agree over just what warning it would be best to use to scare the pants off really almost nearly everybody in that town. That almost nearly everybody needed to be scared soundly these old near-death life warriors had no slightest doubt at all. That they, with one appropriate warning, would be able to do it they had no doubt of either, not as they became more drunk. It all depended on the warning. "How about 'Snakes loose from zoo; they will get you!'" one suggested, and the other laughed, winey-breathed him down and countered with "Improper factory processing brings breakfast poisoning; death soon, maybe before noon." But of course they were just warming up with such as these. What they really had in mind at first was to convince the people that something was coming in from afar to get them all, to flatten the town and everyone in it for their shortcomings. Flying saucer stories were a little too mundane for these old rumor tigers, each of whom was a minor wise-person in many areas, not including of course the area on how to live on Earth with the world as presented to them by history and beyond their blame and, in large measure, beyond their power to alter and make amends for. In other words, these derelicts couldn't adjust, roll with the punch, make the best of it and all that. They were hung up on things like how to earn the daily and how to pay consistently for a roof that didn't leak too much to be under at night in moderate to heavy wet stormy weather. They were losers. Protestors. Disturbers. Snarlers and howlers unto the end. YES! And yet, they both, looking mysterious, talked at times of days when they were far away from this place and important enough to be sent on secret missions. And neither one knew then just how much the other might be stringing the long bow of falsehood.

"Sometimes I'd just like to take a machine gun up to 4th and Main and stand there and open up on them as they go by on a workaday Monday, perfumed, nyloned, after-shaved and Palm-Beached up," one or the other of them might say at any time, and mean it.

Finally these old complainers, after many, many bottles of beer, accentuated by a few shots of cheap wine provided by anonymous donors, and after almost an entire afternoon of argument, decided upon their leaflet. And it was a good one. They both agreed that it was the only leaflet worth doing at all and the only one that would properly shake their town and, if spread properly, the state, the country and the whole world.

The leaflet read simply this: YOUR CHILDREN ALL ARE THREATENED WITH ADULT POISONING. TOMORROW, SUNDAY, A GIANT SHINY BLACK SKY-TRAIN WILL COME TO BEAR THEM TO SAFETY. DO NOTHING TO TRY TO STOP THIS. IT IS DECIDED.

SIGNED,
THE DECIDERS

Well, naturally, many of the parents of the town, finding the leadflet on the doorstep, stuck in their flower pots, or sticking from their mailbox slots, thought it all a big joke and a harmless enough hoax, although one a little bit in poor taste and altogether unnecessary. Actually they were not shaken much, because this, remember, was a leaflet-spreading time with all kinds of protests being aired in slogans, and high jinks galore being performed for any and all occasions. Who could take time out to take even one more warning seriously? And if the children were threatened with adult poisoning – well, fine. Most parents, reading into it what they wanted to, took this to be merely a poor choice of words, and they translated it to mean certainly that the children would grow up to be fine healthy adults, like their parents, with a lot of wealth, cars, good jobs, competitive drive, and maybe even church on Sunday, but nothing serious, and certainly not any amount of deep thinking.

The old bitter derelicts chuckled in their pad in the basement under a small grocery store where rats were wont to scamper at night and where cockroaches did a thousand quadrilles at the merest hint of a crumb. "Smug and safe," they said. "And here their children are threatened with a terrible thing. Any half-day on the street in observation will tell you just what a terrible thing. Oh, if we could just save our children." Which last was a strange outcry, since neither of these old hard-tops had a child or even a wife to show for a career spent in opposition and drinking.

That high-up day of the endless blue, when the distances for threat and the spaces to be filled with danger seemed illimitable, if you had such a turn of mind (though of course you could have seen such distances as great spaces from whence relief and help could come sailing); that day the plans of the old time-ruined wise-men worked better than almost anyone could have expected. It was a speck at first and then a spot, and then a string, a snake, a rope! and then a long, long chain of little sausages, linked in black and spinning out in the high-up blue. The sky-train came on in, light on the air, long and spinning black, held by something miraculous, or absurd, hovering in above the buildings and coming down when it chose in a cleared place, HUGE – but landing lightly as a cloud would kiss at a mountain top on a sunshiny day.

Since it was vacation weekend times, the children, all with hours on their hands, no school and curiosity to throw at the birds, ran out as fast as they could scamper to the cleared place at the edge of town. The parents who bothered to notice and who were not too busy at TV or stocks and bonds or a monthly report with a sales chart, sprinted after a while after their children, suddenly of course remembering the leaflets and the sky-train predictions that might just be a grimmer joke than they could ever ever have imagined.

But they got there too slow by a lot of too late. Too fat for wind sprints, too old for the distances, their children beat them by a wide country mile of time and entered a black coach of the sky-train, where a big place shaped like a candy bar was set up like a sweet shop for sure. And a popcorn popper was merrily announcing fluffy white explosions alongside ice-cream cones, soda-pop dispensers and a dozen flavors in popsicles, not to mention snow cones and candy mountains galore.

When all the children had some sweet or another clutched in their greedy little hands and that certain childhood look of enchantment glistering from their eyes, the sky-train lifted; lightly as it had come, it went. And wind-sprint-losing parents far back in the streets, having flunked out both in the dashes and the distances, shook their heads and did not know just then anything to say. Silent, head-bowed, burdened, crushed and defeated, they returned to their cool, expensive, gadget-encumbered, labor-saving houses where comfort in good style was most worshipped. Then, in dramatic burst, the silence, stunned and heavy, lifted, and the sounds of waily weeping were heard in almost all those houses. After a while the mayor, childless and wifeless himself, took to the air and made a long and eloquent speech about the strange appearance and disappearance of the sky-train. Being a religious pretender and a fill-in preacher on Sunday, naturally he told the town to stop this unseemly weeping, put its trust in the Lord, come to church more often and pray for a happy ending.

The two old wise-men, pulling at their wine bottles in the basement place under the grocery store, chuckled and chuckled and could hardly stop chuckling. Then one said what they both must have been thinking ever since the miraculous advent of the long link-sausage black sky-train: "You would almost have thought, huh, we know something, huh, ahead of time, huh?" Then, for some reason, at their beer before that night was over they began to look, each at the other, with a great deal of suspicion. Much as foreign agents look at one another they looked, when both are caught in a far lost place and both long to shout demandingly at the other, the sudden stranger, "WILL THE REAL SPY ALIEN PLEASE...?"

Any Heads At Home

At first I was always scared that the policemen would come. And there I'd be up in my poor little room kicking this head. So the extreme pleasure I would be getting would be tinged with fear – not guilt, not at all – but fear that sooner or later those big blue men would come on their leather-cloppy feet – heel plates thundering, thick knuckles pounding, and say, "Who's that up there making all that noise? Like kicking a head. Who's it? OPEN UP!!" And there I'd be.

I knew they would not be interested in the head as such – not much – though they might take it from me as a matter of police routine. They most surely would be interested in the ring things, the diamond tie-stick and the other valuables that had been buried with this rich eccentric fatty-round little old millionaire man who was, all his adult life, in tin. They had been taken by someone else, I swear, because I didn't, and don't, care even one little wormy fig about a diamond stick. Or a diamond millionaire ring. But I do care about kicking heads. Ah! Ha! Yes!

It was a night of black-blood clouds and mottled afterbirth moon and a sky on the edge of tears when I saw my chance. Over at the corner of the Hallowed Resting Cemetery, behind the big-angel monuments of a couple of civic men, they had opened this guy up. His grave, I mean. They must have worked when the moon was tumbled down; the cemetery watchman must have been watching in the bed that night. At any rate, they pulled it off, let's give them credit for that – cruddy unprincipled grave-disturber types who would rearrange a man from his hallowed resting just to have his rings and his diamond stick. Well, I

wouldn't do that. Who would, but the worst? But here came me, night-prowl-type walk-aloner smell-the-dark-flowers bachelor tinsmith me. About fifty-five years old. And I saw they'd disturbed this new grave over behind where the big angels spread those stone-feather wings. And I saw they'd fixed it back, too, so no one much would notice, no one much except maybe an expert. ME! So I became interested.

I fell to digging on top of that new dirt, just got down like an animal on all fours and dug for dear death, as you might say. When my nails tore and my finger ends began to leak-bleed I wrapped them in my ripped-up shirt and kept right on going down. When I had the fresh dirt all out and the lid under my hand I was glad and thankful for those who had dug before. Because now I could get the lid up. They'd had special tools, those cruddies who had come for the rings and the diamond stick.

I got down in there with the thing, worked in close quarters, threw up the lid, pulled my knife out, cut the head off with a bit of tough hacking, dropped the lid down, came back up, kicked a little dirt in the hole and came on home with, under my coat, the prize.

Now, that was several months ago, and I will say this – the head has held up fine. I keep it in the refrigerator as an extra precaution, wrapped up like a melon I'm trying to keep for Halloween, when I'm away working in that poor tin-works factory, and only kick it of a night when I get home. And on holidays, as well as Saturday and Sunday, I kick it. And somehow, though I guess it's silly to say this, I feel a real close kinship with this head, because he was in tin all his adult life making millions, and I've been in tin all my adult life making mostly nutmeg graters, you see. PARTNERS! You see?

Now, in case you think I'm eccentric, I will say, in my own defense, that I don't act any worse than the rest of the fellows when I'm up at the tin-works factory making nutmeg graters. I do my work, play my little jokes, eat my lunch, drudge the afternoon out and come on home. And who's to know how many of the others have heads at home, in the refrigerator, that they come home to and kick. Maybe they're all like that. But I have mine, and that's all I care. The others can get their own heads. I do know that some of the guys are married and it just could be that they have their own troubles. Who's to know?

And when the big blue guys come on their leather-cloppy feet and rap their thunder knuckles against my poor little one-room landlady-type kitchenette and demand, "Who's that making all that noise kicking up there?" I've long past thought up what I'm going to say. I'm going to say, "Me! I'm kicking this head up here. But I just do it after work week-days, on holidays, and on Saturdays and Sundays. The rest of the time I work. At the tin-works factory. And make my honest living. Like any honest man."

They'll turn their snoop tails then and slink their gleamy boots and knife-edge creases and big blood leathered look down that cockroach landlady stairs, feeling sorry for me, I bet, not having more time off to do what I like. What else can they do? How else can they feel? Under the circumstances, what else?

So it's not the police that're worrying me right now. Not a bit, right now. Because I've got that solved, as I just told you: I've thought of the right thing to say. And when you've thought of the right thing to say, that's it! That's security; that's solutions; that's serenity; that's the big pink end of the cloud. What worries me right now is another thing. That's why I've been behaving a bit strangely lately, could be. That's why every night before I go home from the tin-works factory I buy me either a volleyball, a basketball or a little round melon fruit. And I know I don't need to mention to you that the cheerful melon vendor man is happy about the sales, while that sporting goods chap is beginning to hike the eyebrow up. He's beginning to have that question-mark look and that unbelieving smile as he rings up the sale of another athletic ball to skimpy little old middle-aged tinsmith me and slaps my money in. He's getting SUSPICIOUS! But he doesn't worry me such-a-much, because when he gets that eyebrow hiked too high and that smile too unbelieving I'll just switch back to the cheerful melon vendor man for good-and-all and buy something suitable there. Or I've thought of other things. I've even thought of balloons as a final solution to the round-object question, weighted balloons! They'd be cheap, wouldn't they?

So, as you've probably guessed, it's not what's coming up the stairs that worries me such-a-much right now. It's not where to get volleyballs, basketballs, round melons or weighted balloons either, although that all could be an embarrassment, as well as an expensive little bother, over the long haul. What worries me the most right now is that man standing down the street night after night, with his ragged hacked-up collar sort of scooping up shadows and the street lamp's half-light glow. Night after night when I look (and I always look) he's standing between the corner post and the street lamp. Looking? No, I'm sorry, he's not peeking and prying. He's just standing there, quiet — quiet as a man pre-occupied might, one who's trying to straighten some terrible something out in a bothered mind. But after I bomb the street corner with a basketball, a volleyball, or a little round melon, he seems helped. He seems satisfied. He goes away — for a while.

But he's back again the very next night when I look, right after kicking, and it's always the same the way he's standing between the corner post and the street lamp. I can look right down through a big hole on top of his bloated pustulous neck and see nothing. But NOTHING! And I'll admit it makes me feel a little squeamish at times, that part about the hole on top of his neck and the NOTHING. Then in a kind of a frenzy I

fling the window up all wide to all the ghostly night, and I fill the air with game balls – basketballs, volleyballs – drop little round melons crashing to the street and wish for weighted balloons to go with – BOMBS AWAAAY! But all this, I have to admit, leaves nothing changed in the cold air of morning; the alarm clock roars off, I fling myself out of bed and prepare for the tin-works factory. And he's gone – back to wherever he has to go, I guess – leaving all the round things I've offered him; they're scattered all wide around the street. I pretend not to notice, though some are smashed, juicy and bleeding. I pretend everything's fine as I march for the tin-works factory. And he pretends everything's fine, I suppose, as he lies out there all day in Hallowed Resting Cemetery, neck all empty, head all gone, and tries to straighten things out in his absent mind.

Routine Emergency

I'm strictly a shovel man in this life we have here. I'm a worker, not a leisure-crowded man with a zip-car who can use these big roads the way they were meant to be used. I'm a clearance man. Been in some phases of that work for about fifty years. And I'd say we're a helluva lot more efficient at it today than we used to be. It's not so much new methods, though that helps, as it is a state of mind. The way you look at a thing is the deciding vote on almost any question, don't you think?

Well, we used to lay 'em all out nice and straight, and take some of 'em in if we thought they had a chance, and patch up the rig if possible, and take down numbers and names and make a man-sized incident of the whole proceedings. As you can see, that took time, was inefficient, and held up the arterial flow, as you might say, a good deal. Now, what do we do today? Say, just let me give you a run-down on a little job we had this morning, and maybe that'll explain the service. As I said before, my job is clearance. Without me these record traffic flow movements we have today wouldn't be possible, and excuse me, I'm not bragging. Sure, I'm proud of my job, just as a plumber might be, or any other honest union worker who's dealing in an important commodity or service and doing it right and getting honest pay, and not having to strain to do it. I guess you might say my commodity is speed. My job is clearance, as I believe I said before.

Anyway we were sitting around the station this morning, the on-crew was, watching the board, playing the usual cards, passing the usual ribs, swapping the usual tales. The off-crew was upstairs sponging their boots, cleaning up, getting ready for prayers and bed. Things had

hardly settled down when the board came up with our number and the spot we were to go to. We weren't excited like those firemen are expected to get every time, because the board comes up with our number, on the average, about twenty-five times a day. And you just don't get excited about your work that many times a day, day-in-day-out, unless you're crazy.

We loaded into the big yellow clearance rig, which is about the most efficient vehicle of its type yet devised, and fed it the position we were expected to go to. When we press the right numbers and road names, a spot of light forms in the brains of the vehicle and soon appears on a sensitized map of the county where we operate. That spot of light marks the position of our job. And since all the alarms were already on out there automatically, our rig would home in on the sound without a bit of trouble.

I may as well tell you now we call our rig Big Soup. Now don't get the idea we're sentimental in our crews, but still it just seems natural to name our rigs, since we're with them so much, and I guess we do get attached to them, like a crew for a ship, sort of. Well, the Big Soup went on out this morning in a most routine way, and we were all feeling routine and sort of yawnish, because it was rather early, and we'd had a very hard day yesterday. A lot of calls, I mean. When we pulled up to the spot, it looked like a very usual job, and it was, except for one thing that made it a little unusual, but not very unusual, and I'll tell you about that after awhile, if I don't forget it.

I let down the front end take-ups, Jug let down the rear end take-ups, and Tanks and John were each operating out of the sides. Jake, the senior clearance man, was holding Big Soup on to the spot and moving her a little whenever necessary to do the job. You see, we're a standard five-man crew. And Big Soup looked something like a great ripe pumpkin now laid down in four sections on the highway, with a big pot in the middle brewing the stew. The four sections probing out over the pavement and feeling along the embankments were like big vacuum cleaners whisking whatever loose things they came in contact with into the pot.

After a while we had the job cleaned up except for a little shovel work caused by rough ground affecting the efficiency of the take-ups, and we all helped on that, even Jake, who I'd say is about the best crew leader I've ever worked with. We cleaned things all up fine, sectioned the Big Soup up into her usual globe-on-wheels condition, and then came on back to sponge our boots, and watch the boards between jobs, and play a little cards, naturally. Oh, we horsed around a bit, too, you know the way a close-knit crew will. Kidded each other about our work, our wives, big taxes, mothers-in-law, etc. And Jake, of course, had to make out the reports according to the number plates involved

and notify the people most concerned and have the cups for the burial ready when those people should arrive. And he had to have the contents of Big Soup assayed for metal and make a report on that before it could be dumped into the unit mix for shipment to the big steel mills. I'll say right now I wouldn't be a crew leader for the little extra that's in it, though I will say I'm pretty proud of my work and I think it's important what I'm doing to keep the big roads clear.

And now you want to know what was unusual about this job this morning, but not very unusual, that I said I'd tell you about if I didn't forget it. Well, it was about a burial cup. You see, in our work we just melt everything together as we go, don't have time for anything else you might say, and just dip out a cup of mixture for decent burial when required. Usually we only dip two cups, one to each of the next-of-kin of the two parties involved. But I have seen instances, in these multiple affairs, usually caused by a fog, where we might have to dip as many as twenty cups, and that takes steel! Because it's mostly metal, the way we do it. I suppose it is a comfort to the bereaved to know that the old decencies have at least been nodded at. — But I do run on. — You see, when one party, a woman, came for the burial cup this morning she just accepted it in the usual way and said she'd see to it that friend husband got a decent plot, which was, she said, the very least she could do, though God knew when she would be able to afford another zip-car. But the other party, a man, put up quite a fuss when he came for his cup, because we'd slouched our job, he said. Seems his wife's old lady, his mother-in-law you might say, at the incident had somehow got over an embankment and out into a cornfield and had struggled home with only a broken hip to show for it. He wanted to know if we wanted to come after her, since by rights he felt that she should have been vacuumed up too and in the soup, since she was out there cluttering up the arteries, or had been. But we said gosh no! we couldn't do that, it wasn't any part of our job to do that, though if she'd been in the way at the time of the clean-up we'd certainly have vacuumed her. We finally convinced him he should take his cup of the wife and kids and the family zip-car on home for decent burial and quit such unseemly fuss.

As you can see, we can't afford to get mixed up in any family sentiment on our job. And most people don't expect it nowadays anyway. Our job is just to vacuum up the bodies and the broken zip-cars as fast as we can after a wreck on the highway and keep the big lanes clear. It's a fair job, we got a union, and it's considered priority work. Heck, the young guys even get deferred in it in time of war.

A Vision of the King

Pulling his three blunt boats out of a cold-ball sunset he came into my range. And I shuddered, even at that far out shuddery he was for me. Not since a long time had it been this way, a crackling dry hum in the air and the heart racing like a shaft cracked loose from its load and everything standing back a little, just a little back to give me more room for dread. Or was it that at such times I shrank just a little and everything stepped back thus, not really, but was the same, and I was stepping in from all sides just a little, shrinking in tight to calculate disaster? Or was it more just now that I had a death-high fever, mental fever and torn flesh-strips of the brain, an unsettling that made me see phantom things?

Well, anyway –

He came on, outside my window, far down the lanes of plastic, until I saw he was just at the line where it would be discussion, discussion in his own decision gears whether to swing and miss me or come on in for showdown and confrontation. With that dry-hum warning through the air and the heart racing wild I almost hoped him to swerve. And drag those boats on by. Far out. Maybe tomorrow – maybe some tomorrow – courage. At least not this anniversary of a pale and whining white yesterday. But there are so many anniversaries of our poor-show yesterdays. Ah, every day. But if we could pick a day, well, we'd pick it and have the lead-ball heart barely clicking a little beat as we stood up calm, icy-cold, and ice-eyed stared our doomsday down – a breezy flick of sleet, an ice storm of contempt, and HA, it's done. WE WIN!

GAWHANG!! – Yes, the fever was pounding worse and we had locked on danger, close in and coming on. And so we would not pick

The Day, we would not. NO! The Day had picked us. Yes. AGAIN! And so we thought of all the days and all the times of little dyings and wondered why we did, and all the days and times of inconclusive deaths and wondered why we did, but yes, we did, we faked up courage, even though it was not our day for courage, we were not ready, and yet we were not ready to say we were not ready, our banners were out in black. At the very top-post point of the flagstaff.

White would have been easier, how much easier, white for surrender, but – well –

The sound was high and whining in my ear, the manner was one of patience. "I came with these small boats," it said, "a long way. And yet they're not truly usual boats. I think it takes no keen thinking nor sharp-eyed analysis to see they're not truly the usual skiffs or boats. In fact, I think it really would be quite hard even with hard trying not to perceive what they really are."

I didn't know what to say. I finally said, turning and peering to try to see the speaker better, "Well, they're nice, quite nice and sort of shiny." Although I wasn't at all sure they were nice. In fact, I thought they were probably quite the opposite from nice. Shiny – polished – yes, they were. And if he liked them –

"Nights and days, days and nights, I've pointed towards this place. From a long way out. I've seen your lights shining, I've heard noises. I'm keen on noises, very keen on noises, especially sounds of revelry – since my great choice is silence. I haven't hurried, but I've come. Steadily. And always dragging the blunt-boat objects. Let's just call them boats; they're suitable for a ship's long trip."

He started to unstrap one, the center one, which was black – they were all on small-wheeled skeleton trailers – and I wondered what was in store. Then, strange shadows leaping, he flicked his hand at a place and I saw a lid spring up to reveal a hungry mouth, a soft white mouth where one could lie at full length and be eaten in sick spongy pale softness. A long time. "It's nice," I said again, babbling the foolish sounds to break up the silence he nurtured, "quite nice. But perhaps you're at the wrong boat stop."

"I'm NOT," he said, "at the wrong stop. I'm HERE. And if through some lack of preparedness, some lapse in the way you have been, you feel all unfit for this honor, let us now have it said."

So he was leaving the way wide open for me to snivel. But I did not snivel. "I once dragged guns from place to place," I said, "and shot at adversaries. What I could see I could ward. Once. When I was young and had the heart to stand up, pure contest was everywhere. And I was in the lists. Life was a battle and I knew it. But now you come with unseen things, wrapped up in boxes – empty boxes! – Sure, I could have

blasted you out there on the open reaches. For truth is I have felt you coming for longer than I care to know it. But tell me, would it have helped anything if I had blasted you at any time? Out on the open reaches?"

His eyes in his great-length face did not compromise, though I looked hard, stared for some hint of change. They were black cold blots of hardest truth as he shook his head in the negative for just a little. "No," cold and completely final was the lone word of his answer, and even that was unnecessary. He too, I thought, seemed sorry that it was all so over and done with when the blunt boats came. After a suitable pause of sorrow and time for remorse, "The boats would get through in any event," he said.

"Without you to drag them?"

"Even though you had blasted our approach around the clock, every day, all through, I still would have risen up and walked on in. At the Time."

"Then there is truly no hope?"

"Truly no hope. Except you accept what you would term 'the hopeless.' The battle you put up is what puts a problem in this thing for you. For everyone. Everywhere. Every time."

"Then I'll just accept one of these lovely boats, climb in and set sail," I said mockingly. "It's that easy, if I accept?" Were the shadows laughing?

"It's that easy." I had a little idea then that the black cold blots glittered just slightly as though in victory and mockery, but surely not. Surely this was truth, as true as any truth could ever be – final truth. And yet –

"How long would I have for last letters – if I accepted?"

This shook him. The cold blots compressed for an instant and a small frown of anger I noted tightened across his long face. "Acceptance, the kind I'm thinking of, would imply no time, absolutely NO TIME, for last letters. Besides, who would you write them to? The wind? A star? A hole in the ground? – Don't you see, that kind of thinking, that kind of reluctance, the putting off, if you will, is the trouble, the whole trouble? That's why I have to drag these boats where I go, and wait on the outskirts, the perimeters of towns, the boundaries of countries, aye, even the edges of beds, until the last tick, the very last tick. I'm the king they keep in the beggar's role! And why? WHY? A misunderstanding, that's why."

A long shadow, one that hadn't moved ever, to my memory, in all of my times of living and lying here, now turned and twisted for a peep around a corner, and a riderless rocking chair started up to rock, surely powered by earthquakes. And that hum? That whine? Was a high wind

rising out in the Unknown Country, land of the plastic peaks, or was it a rabble of ghosts now forming, an army to come in and get me?

"Do you have a contract?"

"A contract?"

"I mean, do you produce assurances along with the boat? Something that we could both sign? An ironclad kind of thing that would rule out all problems?"

"You and the boat are the contract. And me. We three. What more could be needed for the longest trip in the world?"

"I could ask for guarantees of absolutely no problems of any kind on the long trip."

"And if I assured you?"

"I STILL COULDN'T BELIEVE YOU!"

And so I had said it. I had finally revealed my cowardice, which he must have known all along. He said not another word as he busily set about strapping the unloosened boat-object to its skeleton trailer, and he saw to the security of the other two. There was no hopelessness about him, just a long patience showing in all of his small sounds and moves. And suddenly I had a larger vision of this thin dark form, saw him waiting outside burning cities as the bomb-freighted rockets came in and came in, or standing about the oceans as the tipping ships spun down, or attending at individual beds — EVERYWHERE. And here he had found time to furnish me with a choice of boats! For my trip. Suddenly I knew why he was such a true regal king, though kept in a beggar's role and generally uncrowned by a world of sullen subjects cursing and running. "Some time," I found myself shouting — "SOME OTHER TIME, SURE, BUT NOT NOW."

"I'll be back." And he left in a flurry of leaves coming down in my yard, ersatz leaves whirling down from many ersatz trees outside my window, and a cold wind whining on the plastic in a time of Seasons Change. Then the fever closed in again and I knew, YES, knew that he would be back to finally sink all my ships, except for the one last blunt boat he would leave me. And that for the long ride...into the Dark King's shoreless oceans....

Training Talk No. 12

It was December now and snow was feather-sliding down toward our dirty windows, like billions of bleached seed-floats sterile from some great ice tree in the sky, I sometimes thought – floating pieces of the world's great gloom-and-cold, I sometimes thought. But the air outside was full of the crisp jingle and tinkle of things, and the programs for weeks now, when I had tuned in for weather and world news, had been sneaking in a few words concerning the Terrible Thing. Little Sister at her doll beds and Little Brother at his soldiers and launch pads had turned and looked with a frightening kind of awe, and hope, at each small mention that got through of the Terrible Thing, before I could flick the knob over. Little Sister, I had to think, looked something like a starving little squirrel, her slender face and funny blunty nose poked tautly toward the hedges of her uncombed yellow hair; and Little Brother must have looked like a starving heavyweight boxer in miniature, with his fine square build and sturdy legs and bull-like mien made incongruous by the thinness and scrawniness that started just below his neck around his collar bone and extended like a blueprint of poverty across his well-sprung ribs. I fed them enough, hell knows. But sometimes I thought they weren't happy and maybe discontent was the reason they didn't progress in flesh. But we didn't come here to be happy. NO! We came here to KNOW!

"Little Sister! Little Brother!" I yelled. "Leave off the dolls and the launch sites and come here." They came and when they were planted at attention, trembling slightly before me, I said, "No, it isn't for portraits this time. It's for training talk. And I had sought to avoid this

one. Partly because it just isn't worth a training talk and partly because it is so tied up with the many other lectures that I, your one remaining staunch parent, will be forced to give you, that somewhere it must all seem redundant. I really think if we could hold off on this thing until I could give you all of the other talks and you could see the whole big picture of this life-situation you'll be forced to go into, this training talk about the Jollies would be entirely beside the point. Unnecessary, I mean. But every time you hear a certain word, this awful word, or some reference to it, you both look at me. Little Sister looks at me like a squirrel looking out of dirty yellowish fall hedges, and Little Brother, you look at me as though you were remembering something. Maybe you're both remembering something. At any rate, you can see how you force my hand."

"Didn't intend it, Pop," Little Brother said. He was half past five. "I'm sure we didn't intend to do it, Daddy," Little Sister, who was somewhere after four, said.

"All right! I'll take your word for it. We won't argue it. Now, let's get on. Every year, about this time, something happens. Perhaps you have both noticed it, ever since you have been big enough to remember. And perhaps you - at least you, Little Brother - remember a time when your mother - But enough of that!" I got a firm strangle hold on an iron lump just starting to feel like a big twisted nail in my throat, almost before it even started. I hoped the kiddies hadn't noticed. Certainly I could have none of that. I coughed and blew my nose. "Hell, if it's another cold -" I said. "All right! Where were we? Oh, yes. Every year about this time something happens. Even though we stay in the house and don't go out at all, and I sit here at my easel and paint fiery pictures of summer with big droughts burning up hope, and we watch the weather and world news and have everything we need sent up to us, and you kiddies just play busily with your homemade toys all day, we'll still somehow know about this threat that's fast forming. They'll noise it in the streets, they'll cry it on the programs, and they'll even sky-halloo it from planes and drag it across us, hitched behind the lighter-than-air the big tire companies own. And in a place downtown, the biggest place downtown - I'll let you in on this, because I know from the years I used to go out - it's the same sound, and I know what's going on! - in this biggest place downtown they've got a rubber bag. It's colored all red, except for black patent and some white-fluffy tufts to make like real fur. And it's got the longest, whitest shimmer of wave-curved ersatz hairs - well, about as long as the chin crop on that old man reaping there." I pointed at the big picture of the gaunt man and the scythe I have featured on our walls. "But this thing in the place downtown is not a lean, fine harvester like that old man working there. It's silly fat, I say; it's soft. And you may not believe this, but it's true, take my word for it

— this hollow fatty bag sits there in the front window of the biggest place downtown for a full month and a half, day and night, beats two black patent lumps together on a couple of sticks it has got sticking out from a little removed from a thinned place for a neck, and it laughs about things. It goes 'Ho! ho! ho!' I know it! I've seen it. I've heard it. I know! And sometimes when the wind is right, in latter November and almost all of December, we can hear this ogre-shape even this far laughing at us, taunting at us about how we're caught and surrounded and soon to be gulped and eaten by the soft fat dangerous Jollies coming through the air, riding in on the wind, volplaning — from EVERYWHERE! Haven't you heard that laugh? Haven't you?" They both denied it. But just then a gale-burst whipped smartly at our windows, and I'm almost sure I heard a very faint, very hollow ho-ho-ho rolling in on the wind, from toward that big place downtown.

"And what really happens when this awful thing gets going, when it firmly takes hold, in latter November and almost all of December? Not the hollow rubber monster-bag that shouts up all the Jollies and laughs at us when we're caught and surrounded, I don't mean that. I mean the thing, the threat, the event he's part of, the agitation for utter implausibility of action, for dismissing the guards and surrender!" I covered my face and my shoulders shook and knots began to form in my stomach and there was a wintry feeling of great hopelessness locked in my bowels. "God!" I said. "And I don't mean God," I said. "Because that's part of another training talk; so forget I said God," I said. "But God!" I said, "what happens? WHAT REALLY HAPPENS to everything in latter November and almost all of December?"

They could tell I was getting agitated, and I knew they feared for me, and I was sorry for them; so I said, "It's all all right, kiddies, I'll hold it down. What happens," I whispered, raspy and sick and low out of a cracking throat, "in latter November and almost all of December?" Then, quite unexpectedly, I collapsed upon the floor; and when I came back to consciousness, I was at full-length looking into their scared thin faces peering down at me like poultry; and all at once I knew I would never be able to tell them enough of what I knew about the horrors of this invasion. "We'll stay inside," I said. "We'll lock all our doors until it's over," I said. "I'll paint night pictures of haystacks and the moon on fire in July. I'll have red-black monster-bags, fur-trimmed, fleeing pitchfork clouds through whirling scuds like tornadoes. I'll demolish the Jollies in a pair of black cyclones. We'll nail the windows!"

"How about the chimney?" Little Sister asked, with a noise that was a shimmering tremolo of hope, I knew, like sounds out of a whole clothesline full of little golden bells might be, shaking in a great black sleety wind. "Mightn't a Jolly squeeze down through there? If it really tried? Even a big, big one all thick-wide with a sack?"

"We'll shove the bathtub under there," I shrieked, "and keep it always full of boiling water. We'll heat flatirons and big andirons. I'll set up another interior guard; we'll take turns. And just to make sure this thing doesn't get into us, doesn't take hold of us and soften us for the invasion, we'll start wearing our earplugs again and take vows against looking out the windows. And to help out, I'll take one more trip outside for some things I'll need in my painting, and I'll try to bring back some small models of the hollow rubber ogre-bag I was telling you about being all decked in the biggest place downtown. And we'll dip these things in sooty dirty water until they're all black all over, and then I'll sketch new faces on them just above the long, waved hairs to look like scared men screaming. After that we'll practice darts at these dirty little duds until the middle of next month next year — Would you like me to do that?"

"Darts, oh boy!" Little Brother said. But Little Sister, dazed and desperate, just nodded yes at me without meaning it, and with a moist, sentimental expression that somehow told me that Little Sister's heart, no matter how much I might try it, would always be on the soft, untenable side of the Jollies. She'd buy this big deal and she'd hope; she'd see fat sacks squeezed through even the smallest smoke flues and cold winds alive with gold bells of Xmas, in spite of all I could say.

Moment of Truth in Suburb Junction

All I know is what I see, and some of that's pretty crazy. But here are these night-looking people running in a mad hurry, coat tails flying back, dress hems swirling up, shoes going clat-clat clat-cleat clatclat. And here I am in an alley, loafing, so beat-out tired and unvital I can't even decide whether to get up or lie back harder. And if I do get up, am I going to walk around the corner to Nick's and cadge for a beer, or am I going a block down to Joe's, who sometimes gives me a beer? Joe and I were together in a war, 'way back, wars ago, so it's old times makes him do it, I guess....

Finally I decide just to lie back harder, save up my energy for a while and then go around the corner to Nick Rogota's place, where most of the action usually is anyway....

There isn't a soul at Nick's today but Nick! and he is now wiping the bar in a sort of furious way with one hand and breaking glasses with the other – working in such a flurry that I can hardly see him.... I notice through a haze of smoke how there is evidence that a lot of people have just left fast from Nick Rogota's place. I see where one barfly has gone off so unexpectedly he leaves a half-smoked butt, and some dame in a hurry has forsaken a lipstick and a pink glove. Nick is raking this truck off like the junk it is, flips me a half Camel and growls, "Take it and go. Not open. Closin' it up!" Hey, since when does Nick Rogota close up so early in the morning, on a Thursday? "What's up?" I yell. But Nick won't answer, just goes ahead working in that furious way, mouth buttoned up like a clam. When he is through he comes around the bar, and I can feel him take me

by an arm, as he has for years now, but for some reason more gently this time, and he spins me through a door. I never get mad at Nick about these things, because I know it's just business, but this is the first time he's ever done it so early in the day. I wonder about that. Maybe everyone has taken religion? Then I see him hurry to the back, grab his hat and coat and a little bundle that may be his lunch, or who knows? and head out. He locks the door in a kind of fury; I can hear the key scratching around for the hole while his hand shakes. But he gets it locked, throws the key away, also the bundle that may be his lunch, who knows? and then he takes off. For a fat man built like two misshapen boulders strapped side by side he really moves! For Nick that pace he's making is hurry. What I mean to say is, Nick is no more than one block behind the tail end of Suburb Junction taking off for the wide yonder. The tail end is Miss Burganhaney. She's the first and second grade teacher, whose age is a big secret, and she's built like half of a straight and level stretch of prairie railroad track — long — very few lumps. And she can move! I watch them go. From my comfortable position where I am, across two bricks and a cinder, I think *What a picture!* Nick no more than a block behind Miss Burganhaney and coming up fast! What will he do if he overtakes Miss Burganhaney!? But I jerk that train off the track in a hurry, because I know they're just getting out of town like the rest of the adult population of Suburb Junction must be, all thousand or so of it, and no one is chasing anyone. Or do I know that? All I know is what I see, and sometimes that can be real funny-crazy, I think.

Then along comes this little man, the only person I've seen in Suburb Junction all morning who's not hurrying, and he's a stranger. He's just sidewalking along, putting one little black high-button shoe in front of the other in a mincing step as though he has all of a whole big lifetime in which to walk down one short street in Suburb Junction. But according to sense he doesn't have that much time, because he's very old. A beard of startling white spreads across his shiny black coat, and his chalky face, I notice as he comes in closer, is one mass of going-together wrinkles and crow's-feet. He sees me. "Heay?" he says. His voice is not old and screechy as I expect. It is low and full, with sort of a jolly croak in it. Sounds something like a bullfrog does, when mister frog is not using all his powers maybe, but is just loafing by the big lily pad and moowroonking a little seduction to keep practical; or more like a bull maybe, bellowing low in his pen from across forty acres of summer cornfields. "Heay?" he says.

"Yeah?" I say and try to lie out straighter, knowing it isn't dignified that way I am across those bricks. "Heay," he says, "what-a-ye doin'?"

"Restin'," I say.

"Restin' air ye?" he says. "So yeh're tired, air ye? Got spring fever, huh?" And I admit that I'm resting, am tired and have got spring fever. By that time he has come up to where I am lying in the alley, but he

stays in the street. He sets a little black case down he has been carrying in his right hand, and he shakes the sleeves of his shiny dark coat back a small way from his wrists. Then he swivels his hands in a fluttery way, in a spread-fingered way, like I've seen men do who are preparing for something delicate. Like rip off something high-class on a piano maybe, or milk the Guernsey when they don't very much know how. "So yeh're tired, air ye?" he intones and spreads wide his legs and raises his hands high and assumes the position of exhortation, like maybe a camp-out minister might. "So yeh're tired?" I admit again that I'm tired, and I admit that I've been tired ever since I don't remember from 'way back when, and it's been a long time since anyone troubled to ask, and thank you, Sir! "They call you a bum, don't they?" he asks, very seriously, but not unkindly, so I don't get up and make fists. I just correct him politely. "They call me a no-good bum."

He unbuttons his coat, puts his hands under it and claps them behind him. Then he flexes up and down on his short thin legs, not moving out of his tracks much, about two feet in front of me, but just letting his torso enjoy a nice bounce in the smudgy air of this factory suburb. I imagine he is thinking. Then suddenly he straightens up, checks the body in the half bounce and flips his hands out from under his coat. The hands are spread wide and seem ready to shove down toward me, as if they could push all that grimy, befouled air in front of them out past me and away in a great rush. The hands, I notice, don't hold a thing, and there's no jewelry on the fingers; but he says, "I've got somethin' fer ye." Uh oh! I think, here it comes, the little honeydrip lecture, the message. And lordy, I've had a-plenty of these in my time. I haven't always been on my uppers in grubby little Suburb Junction. I've been on the skids, first-class, in some mighty flashy big towns in my day.

"Yeess, I've got somethin' fer ye," he intones. "I didn't know about givin' it to you, because I'm not sure you need it as bad as the rest. You already see pretty clearly how bad things are fer you, I s'pect. And besides, you haven't worked enough to tear up much; you never burned much gas or made much trash. Ha! Your sins are of the opposite. But anyway, I thought maybe ev'rybody ought to be down there together, the loafers along with the hot-shots, the resters along with the go-getters; those who'd burn it all down without a blink, if they thought that'd put them out front, along with the ones who'd just let the world go by. So I came back through, lookin' fer the bums and the stragglers to go with the hot-shots." Then he bends down, stiff, like he is hinged only at the hips, and when he bobs back up he holds a little black bottle he has taken out of the black case. I notice the skull and crossbones in sharp yellow on the black and the initials S-S-R. "Hey...!" I yell. But before I can finish my yell, he doubles up until he looks like a grasshop-

per ready to zoom, and he leaps over and straddles me. He jerks a syringe out of his vest then, fills it full of liquid from the black bottle and applies that liquid through a raggedy hole in my two and a half shirts and my under-shirt before I can say *Hey don't* or *Please don't* or even *No!* Then he jumps back, or I push him off; it's hard to know exactly the action there, because by now I'm up and going and I don't look anywhere I've been....

I can hear the little man cackling behind me as I head out the way the others have gone just in time to see Nick in the smudge and haze, going over a big hill, still holding the pace, but I imagine by now about two and a quarter blocks behind Miss Burganhaney, who is built, as I said, for speed. I've never been this way out of town before and when I get to the top of the hill, there's just mostly nothing there in front of me but a lot of gray, gray distance, and not a soul to be seen. But what I do see pretty soon is sure plenty strange. In a little wood off to the side of the big road the saplings are crashing and thrashing like a storm going in or a storm coming out, or both; the birds are leaving fast, and the earth-bound animals are getting out — toads, frogs, rabbits, snakes, stringy cats, old dogs, chipmunks, and I don't know what all else — almost every kind of animal except man coming out of that timber. I plow on through this mess of stuff that is getting out fast, and I rush in to where the trees have been dancing and thrashing the hardest. And what I see in there is a kind of revelation, it's so surprising.

They aren't fighting in there exactly, and they aren't playing tag in there either. They're just lying there, death-still, in the middle of a big soupy excavation that had been a mining pit for low-grade high-pollution coal. And their eyes are turned up toward the sky; and by the way their heads are cock-angled I figure they are listening for some kind of fearful sound, even while they are looking skyward for deliverance. I rush in to join them; I join their attitudes, and by now I'm thinking we are certain to be waiting for some big thing to hit, maybe even the Day of Judgement, to pay us all back for the way we've lived. We lie there and we wait there, and in the sweat and the waiting it would seem that time loses most of its dimension. And I'm feeling sure if it's the Day of Judgement I'll have as much chance slipping through as a rat would at a brand-new, mouse-proof steel corncrib.

Near the sundown of the day by straining we can just see him, just over the edge of the pit, like a bouncing cork far-out, hanging in the haze. It is the little man come back, bobbing jauntily down the road, not in a hurry, but come strolling, just loafing, as though he has a whole big sky full of time to do this one nice piece of road from Suburb Junction. As he comes nearer, we see that he is not alone; about the time he seemed to stop hanging in the air and hit solid ground, he had been joined by other things. All the animals are following him now — the

toads, the frogs, the rabbits, the snakes, the stringy cats, the old dogs, the chipmunks, and I don't know what all else, almost every kind of a thing, even the birds flying low-cover.

The party turns off the road, comes down toward the timber and into it. When they arrive at the edge of the big swampy hole, the animals sit down on their haunches – those that have haunches do this, the rest make do with what they have – in a loose half-circle around the little man. He regards us coolly for a time while our glances flick out toward him. I don't know what the others are thinking, but I'm thinking we're going to get our just deserts just about now. And pretty rough ones, too.

Then he starts to speak in that surprising, low, small voice that sounds like a tuned-down bullfrog, but more like Ferdinand, maybe, saluting muted-like from across a field: "Folks, Suburb Junction was lucky – selected out! I picked this particular populated section of the world to try out my exclusive, special, never-before-done, new-formula S-S-R shots – Sudden Shocking Realization! On the grownups. The young folks, of course, were exempted, fer now. Most of you I just shot with a needle full fer instant action, and you took off like a pup covered with king-size fleas on top of a scalded back. Others, I knew needed a little bit of time. Like Nick here, fer instance, needed a little leeway to close up his place prope'ly, heh heh. So I fed him and his kind the good old delayed-action Sudden Shocking Realization shot. Then they took off too, all to come down to this big strip-pit hole, because that's the way each and ev'ry one of you felt, and small wonder. I don't blame anyone fer that feelin'!

"Now, I don't have to tell any of you what happened when that Sudden-Shocking-Realization formula took hold. You each and ev'ry one saw yer Sudden-Shocking-Realization selves flash out there and be clearly revealed, like a big black cinder on an ash heap in a pile of oily mud in the front parts of yer brains. *Real stinker clinkers!* And you just wanted to go run and jump into the biggest-blackest-deepest hole you could find, pull that hole in on top of you and lie there – fer ever-and-ever. And, as I hinted, I don't blame any one of you people one bit fer reactin' like that. Fer bein' so terribly terrible, and under like circumstances, I'm sure I should have felt the same. Exactly!

"But Suburb Junction is lucky again! Selected out! I'll show why." And suddenly he quite dipped over, just bent nimbly from the waist, and, looking like a good puppet should, with his knees held stiff and his flailing and flashing arms and hands going, he busily hummed a tune while he was setting out vials from the little black case. These vials were a cheery sunshiny color and they held a fluid that had an amber glow. A small motif of sun and flowers decorated each bottle, as far as I could tell, and between sun and flowers were clearly the letters A-C...

"Folks, step right up and receive these new shots. Then go on back to town and quit scarin' these nice animals. And quit some of that smokin' and smoggin' and burnin', too. Quit it! You hear?"

"Yes! these new shots will sure fix things, if yeh've learned any lessons from recent times. And I mean from very recent times. Hey! Like today."

While the others were crowding around, like a big bunch of country sheep, to get these new injections, I felt some of the old sand start to come up in my craw. And I thought: If he wants me to have a new shot, he can just come and find me on those two bricks and a cinder, like he did before. So I took off, betting I'd never see him again. But some spiteful, baleful, uncompromising, but honest-minded little quirk in me made me willing to give him a fair test against any and all conditions — past and present and the future to come — if he actually should show up and give me that fix-it-up injection. But I was sure betting he wouldn't....

I had just got comfortable on the bricks again, was compromising with the cinder and was ready to try for a big comfortable dream, maybe a really relaxed, rewarding kind of vision for once, where everyone is cheerful, all crowded around, telling stories and jokes and buying each other good drinks of good cheer.... Then I hear it.

"Heay?" it says.

And there he is, like a little cloud in a kind of blaze and halo, but coming in fast, with that big needle and that amber-colored vial that has the pretty sun-and-flowers motif and the legend A-C. "Another chance! Even the village bum...."

I leap up in a rush and hurry away down the alley, and it truly is morning again, with a brand new sun shearing up through all that fog and all that factory air.

Breakout In Ecol 2

We counted our blessings, knowing how lucky we were, we marshals in Ecol 2, that the juices were thin in our old-man veins now; and we laughed just thinking of those youngsters being whammed silly all the time by the chemistry of their healthy young bods. And we watched The Board. For Sign. It was our job!

I remember especially a night. Although, naturally, by the very nature of our job, we had many and many a night and many and many a day to remember and many many "very interesting situations" to mentally tally up. Old Bronk and I – Old Bronk, my ride partner! How can I ever forget Old Bronk!? We each raced our scoots this night that The Board went wild with Sign. Like some superfast firemen going for the pole we were, in our great speed, and we were soon streetborne. There was no doubt that we were two who were dedicated to Mission, and when that signal came in for trouble we were on it like a cat on a tuna can, full-fresh-and-open tuna can. We were ready to go, sail, ride, speed, get there. Those smartass young hardons weren't about to put anything over on Old Bronk and me. Not in our Area of Responsibility. Which was, in a way, the world, the whole Ecol-drawered spread. Yes! In a way...

The discrepancy this time was in a corner of a southern-western district of Ecol 2, and we floorboarded our scoots, as the saying is; we raced the wind. The leatherglass thongs on our handlebars' gleamy reach lay out along the air made solid by our swift passage, and the long leatherglass cowboy fringe on our big-stud cowboy saddlebags rippled with the speed of our charge. We were minions of the law – street-

borne on scout scoots and, in our own ways, the saviours of the entire people-plagued universe, the whole Ecol-drawered package.

The night came apart with bedlam as we rode. All the districts that bordered Ecol 2 threw up warnings and each one offered standby, if it transpired there should be the need. (Which standby meant, per district, two or three old juicy-noodle duffers such as Bronk and I, far past capability of any erection or lewd desire, would be alerted and, in their fine purity, kept awake all night hard by the seats of their scoots.) And there were the standard and standing plans of mobilization for General Outbreak. For who knows, when the wall chips even a little the whole big wide sturdy standing may soon tumble away.

"Some young smartass hardon, I'll betcha," I yelled at Old Bronk through my road mike, "couldn't stand the gaff of this spring weather."

"More'n likely may be it's just this overcrowdin'," Old Bronk yelled back. "Worse'n the full times of the moon, really, to send people all giddy nuts. I still say what we should do is give all them young smartass hardons either castration or aging shots. Aging shots, properly applied, would solve the troubles of the whole world. All of them. Even wars. Hee haw huck! Believe me!"

"Yeah?" I said hard against the wind tearing at me and my scoot. "You may be right, Old Bronk. And then again, you may be wrong, Old Bronk." I was just making noises, really. Small talk, you know, as we rode. I knew Old Bronk was right, ultimately and finally, although I didn't for a minute think he had meant it that way, ultimately and finally. Aging shots, properly applied, would solve it all; no doubt about it. We'd all, each and every one, be dead! No need for Ecol drawers, or anything else, then...

"Look at us," Old Bronk Bronked on, "we'd never in the world kick up a fuss like this on The Board. Even if we could, now would we? Or even want to?"

"Speak for your own, Old Bronk. Who says we wouldn't if we could, or even want to? But no one has to worry about mine now. Limp as a juicy noodle forevermore, now, and I've accepted the facts. And God knows, that's really the reason we've qualified for our jobs, you and I. A proddy rammer young smartass hardon could never do it, and you know it, now could he?"

"Nope, a proddy rammer young smartass hardon could never be a law marshal in this proud service of the drawers where that we serve, and that's the truth. His sympathies 'uld be all otherwise. He'd screw it up!"

We found him cowering in a tiny cluster of plastic weeds, a little old downspread guy all drooped, not much bigger than a simple dwarf. "Why man," I said, "what's your act? You're probably as capable nowadays as a bent soda straw. And that's not much, man! Hee haw hee."

"Come out wit' yehre hands up flaggin', and no nonsense wit' the law!" Old Bronk shouted, all business and all bustly fully the law marshal now, from his white white hair inside his clear helmet to the very toes of his scoot boots' black proud gleams. He'd dismounted, had Old Bronk, had kicked his scoot stand down in a very businesslike way with one of his high blacks and was now ready for come-what-would. I had to admire him, because that's the way to do it in law enforcement. Always be stance ready and keep your zap hand clear-out free, ready to fill it fast if need there should arise. I was a little more casual most times myself, sometimes seeing the comedy in a situation, the freakishness of it all more than the lawman's law enforcement pose. I sometimes thought I'd probably get it because of this, and die laughing.

What a way to go!

The little man came out smiling. "I knew I'd be captured," he said. "Everything's so organized! But it was worth it just to give it a try and get away for a while from that pod. I didn't have any idea of doing anything to upset anything, like, say, a population status quo. Just wanted to get away. For my own special reasons. Besides, 'doing anything' still takes two, doesn't it? Hee hee hee."

"Man, it must be really bad in your pod of detainees or your stick of potential population disrupters, as it were," I allowed, trying to strike contact with the skimpy one and ease him a little across Old Bronk's icy pose. Maybe the runt man really was a pretty decent sort, and something in conditions had just for the nonce got him, had become intolerable for him and set him off for a sinner's and a criminal's show. Guess that could happen to anyone, anyone at all. Some time. He just stared for now, his mouth seeming not able to do it, break out for words, I mean. "What do you guys do?" I went ahead. "Stamp and fuss and bellow around a lot, like hard-up old mount-on cattle bulls inside a tightass fence?"

"Nah," he said, finally unlocking his jaws for speech let loose in a flood, "not at all in my pod or stick of detention, we don't do that, and it's not what you think over there, it's not. Not really at all. Sure, we're in the drawers, as everyone else is in the drawers, of a certain age now, but we don't register much on the Tote Boards, not much at all ordinarily, we don't, I'm sure of that. Just pretty stable in my pod, mostly, and we all know we're doing this bit just because of the law and the times and we suffer it out, or not really suffer, I mean, but do it because most of us over in my slab were old marrieds on the outside, anyway, and very very used to nothing much most of the time and pretty generally all along and steadily. For years and years and years! Except for outside noises, I could -"

"What is it then?" Old Bronk cut in curtly. "Why are you out here wastin' the governments time, money and patience this-a-way by

causin' a chase? Do you realize what each break like this costs your government in wear and tear on scoot tires, scoots, fuel, general mobilization for standby, extra marshals' time for those alerted from off-time to draw overtime, not to mention the intangibles, such as potential danger to life and limb of the personnel of the scoot troops, both active and on-call; not to add the price for the Service Riders' service time, both man and vehicular, when and if we apprehend? Do you?"

He shook his head, entirely dumbfounded and struck giddy by Old Bronk's intensity, I could tell. "Besides, you know you can be shot for somethin' like this, breakin' the law," Old Bronk brayed on. "Yeh're not only technically, but actually and actively a lapsed pant, man! Yeh're Ecol drawers are showin', boy. Like statutory rape in the old days, man, it's a open and shut case. Yeh're in a heap of trouble, plenty, and you know it, fellah. Yeh're guilty for all that anyone could say."

"I'm guilty," he said, "sure. But not like you think. Hell, I've still got on my drawers." And he pulled up the inmate's loose-fitted striped gown to show us his undies, and it was so! Even the plug-ins were still on them, flapping and dangling.

"But - but - " Old Bronk sputtered now, coming loose from his starched shiny pose, "What in thunderin' hell - ?"

"Just my kind of luck," the small one rambled on. "When our district got the orders, down from Central Birth Freeze, and we were all Ecoled in for those control pants, my wife, old fridgy-fridge herself, was billeted in the women's control compound right on the other side of my little cubicle in the pod. Just my kind of rotten luck that this one-in-an-umpteenth-thousand-chance kind of rotten thing would happen to me. Well, she'd keep screechin', see, just as she will when I go back, and she learns I'm there. Screechin' and screechin' through the walls."

"Wanted you over there, hah?" says Old Bronk, a hell of a lawman, but very short sometimes on practicals, I have to say. "Wanted you to tear right through them walls to get to her, huh, so you two could go to town? Go to bed, I mean! Haw haw hee."

"Nah nah nah, not at all at all. And I can sure tell you've never been hitched, not for any length. She just kept screechin', 'Ha, ha, ha, you horny old goat meat. Ha, ha, ha! They gotcha now! They gotcha! And that'll show ya how to quit bein' a pig' - Twice a year - on the good years! - was piggy!?"

So we put the Ecol handcuffs on him and led him over to a bright orange talk-in pole nearby where we could call for a wagon that would take him on down. The wagon Service Riders, more infirm and less glamorous than the scoot patrol troops such as Bronk and I, some even old ladies, would take him back to his compound and hook him into his circuit where his Ecol undies would again start registering all of his erotic urges, on the big Tote Boards in Ecol 2. And this is S.O.P. now for

every breed-capable male and female on the whole Ecol-threatened earth, all over the world! They are somewhere in their compounds, in Ecol drawers, registering their erotic urges, and none, for all the risks involved, is allowed to do anything about it until someone dies in the district of responsibility. Then the couple, male and female, next in line...married, of course...or a service performed on the spot before they do it, to keep everything decent...for those who care....

"I still say it was worth it. For a while, just to get away..." This I heard him muttering as the Service Riders, two perky old gun-swung ladies so it chanced, about seventy-five years young, loaded him in to whisk him back to that control cubicle just a thin wall away from old fridgy-fridge, his wife. Under the circumstances this time all other punishment for breakout was waived!

Riders of Thunder

We had all three-lighted on a match and now stood around deliciously inhaling our smokes under some ladders angled against a wall. Our trademark, snake-eyes jeweled, gleamed from dice we wore like key chains at our belts, and Slice, who was our loved leader, hauled out our mascot Bumps from his special carrying case, which was a blanket-lined box, and started him down the line. We passed him from hand to hand until all of us had pressed at his gently pulsing sides and had slid our palms down his lumpy snake-cold back and had made little playful gestures at his bright black eyes that seemed to stare at us unbelievably. Then, having defied all warts and superstitions of warts, we put Bumps back in his warm little blanket-lined place where he crouched and had toad dreams if he wished where we set him on the gravel by the entrance to the funeral parlor that we knew contained a dead broad. We stood five times each on our heads in front of the funeral parlor in general defiance of things and we must have made quite a picture with our gleaming black engineer boots held steady heels-up towards the drizzly February sky and our black-leather silver-starred and barred motorcyclist's jackets slack and balloony around our chins in the cold light of the mortuary's night neons. Then Slice and a pimple-face called Joints had a fast skilled knife fight with the medium-blade switch over the next order of business, Joints holding out for black cats across our paths and Slice saying that was real sissy, enough of this juvenile stuff, we should be right now on our motorcycles, with the sirens blasting, playing cops at cars across Compton Road. While they cut each other we stood around hip-shot and loose-goose at the waist, not any of us really

caring how it came out just so they got it over with, with most of us nibbling jawbreaker candy or other sweets with dope while they fought, and generally we got fixed up.

When Slice and Joints were through cutting, we patched them with tape and our handkerchiefs and whatever else we had out of our jeweled saddlebags that would apply, and Slice was still the leader though pimple-face had certainly stood up and cut him like a man and should not be ashamed. We wiped the blood from their shiny boots and jackets, and no one had lost face here, and that was for sure.

Soon Slice, his blue eyes cold and thoughtful under the slant visor of his wing-decorated motorcyclist's cap, proved his magnanimity and what has made him our loved leader and said, though he had clearly won, "Hell with my suggestion about cops-at-cars across Compton Road. Hell with the black pussies across us also, for that matter, although I do realize the importance of our keeping up all the proud traditions of the club — when it comes handy. But I just remembered it's Friday the 13th, because it's after midnight now, so why don't we all go out to East Elm Rest and play knives? I'll tell you what we'll do, we'll choose up sides, Joints and I, and each side will have a password. Then we'll mix together and all get lost all over Elm Rest. When I give the signal by blowing my lifeguard's whistle once we'll start hunting each other in the headstones. If a man gives your password when he's challenged you'll count him a friend and you'll let him by. If he gives the other password he's your enemy and you'll fall on each other and start cutting with the knives. We'll use the medium-blade switch for this one, and everyone is on his honor not to employ the big blade and not to use the enemy password in a tight squeak to dodge fighting. But I know you wouldn't do that!" He glowed with the genius of his idea. A piece of his long blonde hair that lay spiraled up from his duckbutt fell out and dangled beneath the short visor of his wing-decked motorcyclist's cap as he stood thoughtful. "I think this will be the best mid-month the Snake Eyes have ever had!"

So we chose and learned the passwords and screamed off towards East Elm Rest, the sirens on our machines making like a whole squadron of coppers chasing a teenager who'd just broken parole on his driver's license charge. We rode like a black cloud full of thunder. We went like hell and danger and death and defiance and all those other fine strong things you come to feel when you're part of the black squadron screaming along like a great proud beast drunk with the wind in its face and drunk with its strength and youth and drunk with all the startling and terrible things it can do, as long as the wheels keep clear. Most of the cars pulled over and most of us swept through. We lost five machines and five riders, but losses we expected. You always do in an operation like the Snake Eyes. If you made it through on the road, you might just

as easily not make it through out in East Elm Rest, and all of us knew that. We felt exhilarated. As I mentioned before, most of us were high anyway, and it didn't mean a thing now except to get the thrills.

We got the thrills! A man would loom out of the blackness and mist as we prowled, and if we didn't get the right password when we challenged we'd fall to and fight each other with the medium-blade switch until one was down in blood, not screaming, but perhaps dying, trying hard to go that real way like heroes in their best exits on the drive-ins' big screens. It was maximum for our order, we were having the best spree we'd ever had, I mean, and we fought and yelled above those very dead coffins until the roosters started crying for morning in the farmyards over toward the river. And all of us were somehow conscious, and very poignantly so, that we were making the most active use possible of the fact that blood yet ran strong and youthful in us, and we were not dead like those very very silent headstones we cried and yelled among.

Near morning, like a vague black-jacketed ghost somewhere among a forest of spired headstones, Slice, still faithfully carrying the mascot's box, sounded his lifeguard's whistle, and those of us who were able assembled at our wheels and saying nothing — we were drained dry of our restlessness now — blew off in muted thunder down-highway toward our homes. The small clamor of our exhausts was somehow dirgeful in our ears now as we rode alone, our jackets slashed, our boots mud-stained and heavy, our wounds smarting and nagging in the chill morning mist of the somehow end-of-things. A racking cough came upon us as we sucked our damp smokes and fled, and we each of us knew, I think, that we had reached a climax. Never before had Snake Eyes left so many on "the field of courage" at a mid-month, never before had so many paid the hero's price for utter fearlessness and defiance of all superstitions, and it was great to know we were so strong in our order. But as we rode and bled that gray morning we each of us would have been something less than normal, I believe, if we did not wonder who of our friends were down among the headstones, which machines yet stood silent in the mist, all the jeweled flaps and saddlebags signifying nothing now, all the chrome and the handlebar leather thongs being but a mockery now with no rider to come and boot down the thunder and send them into the wind. Oh, a few would rise still, cold and mud-caked and aching, with enough strength left to fire up a smoke and kick the thunder down. But of these almost superhuman risers all but a few would topple somewhere along the highway and be found, perhaps by businessmen, maybe even their own fathers who, shaved and perfumed and creamed, gliding by in the early hours of Saturday morning, were getting an "early start" on something. The few others would make it and topple in to their startled mothers at the home yard and beg them not to call the police not even when riders

died, and then would lurch upstairs to be for many days in their rooms with the rock-and-roll records and the heroes on the wall.

But of the still, cold others most of us thought, I think, and wondered how they lay, face-up or face-down, or sprawled in some crazy half-manly ending in a heap like Hollywood's worst death when no hero was intended. How would they be found? Perhaps by little girls, no bigger than their kid sisters, who would be startled with wonder and run to tell; perhaps by tottery old ladies, old as their grandmothers, who would faint; perhaps by boys.... But at any rate they would be found, and everything would seem so much all different in the Saturday sun, with the shoppers' cars going by in their purring purring purring respectability. And the police....

We instinctively knew we must hide our jackets for a while; and the proud Snake Eyes insignias must go from our belts until things blew over. As we rode for home in our blood-stained jackets that leaden February morning after our great orgy, there was a sadness in us too deep for our explaining, but we were proud too, proud that we still rode the thunder.

Somebody Up There Hates Us

This was way back, ten years ago, when 1972 was just tailending out. We called ourselves the space-agers even then, but that was mainly hopeful thinking. Oh sure, we'd been to the moon and around a bit like that by multiple staging rockets, throwing up space stations and going to a lot of real hard awkward effort. But actually we'd been too busy building up automatic luxury right here at home — everything automatic, you know — to make any really good progress toward interplanetary travel. And if what happened that New Year's Eve at Tuunt's ten years ago is any criterion, I'd say someone Out There already has the drop on us anyway.

By about ten o'clock that night I could see things were apt to shape up toward midnight in extra-fine New Year's style. Tuunt's, a spacious nightclub on the eastern edge of Central time belt, was a place that tastefully combined the ancient and the modern, going back to the gray Fifties for atmosphere, and tonight the automatic bartenders were sending our drinks out fast as they could in miniature vehicles that recalled the slower time. Everyone was getting agreeably drunk on good space-age spirits, and what was happening at Tuunt's was, in all its essentials, being duplicated all across the country.

My eighth old-fashioned space squeezings special had just rolled in by Super Chief on the little railroad track leading to our table, and my companion, my wife so it happened, had just taken her whiskey-sour by Greyhound bus. When this guy rolled in. Yes, rolled! He was round as a ball, body-wise, near as I could see (and I still could see, this New Year's Eve toward midnight) but I disregarded his body roundness. All of us space-age frequenters of bars are apt to be round like a ball, body-

wise. But none of us stop there; we go on to have round tubby legs and arms, and fat heads. But this guy! His shoes, big, fat-toed things like scared types used to wear at the steel mills, were right on to what you might call the bottom arc of his stomach. And he didn't walk on them, near as I could see; he rolled on them, and inched like an egg sometimes will go across a smooth table. Yeah, he was mighty low to the floor for New Year's Eve an hour or so from midnight. Or anytime!

I looked at my old-fashioned, and then I looked at my wife. No help there, because she was absorbed in watching a nearby table get a load of beer by 'fast' freight. I fearfully looked back to the floor. He was rolling on down. A big black hat like a thin metal lid was on his head, or should I say it was on the up arc of his stomach? He paused a little moment and then, lightly as a floating leaf, flipped himself to the top of the bar where he could survey the big crowd at Tuunt's. I don't know what the rest thought; I thought I had got drunk too fast to appreciate the joke.

When he clapped off his hat, I noticed for the first time that he had arms and hands. His hands were very fat, but his arms strangely enough were thin; mere rods they were that seemed to fit, when not in use, into little grooves in his sides. His eyes, loving and brown they appeared, had been under his hat, and now they looked at me, seemed to look only at me. But that was a trick he had. "Uk uk uk," he chuckled like a jolly fat man pleased with everything. "All hardworking folks here. All just good hardworking heaven-trusters of Earth who deserve a break." Naturally his voice couldn't sound quite normal coming out of a ball. But it was plain understandable English, even if a little gritty like maybe he had sand under his tongue or someone had salted his tapes. My wife dug her space-ager detachable fingers into my arm and yelled, "Who is - " "Nevermind," I said, "Darling. It's New Year's. Ouch!" She removed her detachable fingers and felt of my arm, old fingers, and said she was sorry. She snuggled, but I knew her well enough to know it wasn't love; she was merely excited.

"All down-to-Earth folks who deserve a break. So - " Then he removed a lid from his side, and I swear I hadn't noticed till then that the clothes he was wearing were only painted on. He took a box out from where he had opened the lid, and it was a large box, one about the size of a shoe box for space-travel shoes. "What is - ?" my wife repeated, and I started again, "Nevermind Darling, it's - " But he had opened the box! Hundreds of things sprang up; bright colors there were and a chaos of movement. "The wish box! uk uke ugk," said the ball on the bar, in his peculiar gritty way. "All hard-working deserving down-to-Earth types here, trying to make resolutions and bang up a New Year's time. But here's the wish box!"

We all forgot our fears – if anyone was sober enough to have them – and crowded around the big black ball. “Uk ukle ugk, don’t crowd, folks. There’s one for each and every good folk here. And the fee is small, real small.” We went right on crowding, and we started to trample each other – just normal space-ager Americans eager for first go at a good thing cheap. “Stop crowding!” the round one gritted a little sharply, “or I may find myself and my gift boxes unnecessary.” We quieted a little, picked up a few who were down, and I wondered just what he could have meant there at the last. Oh well, concentrate on the wish, that’s always the best thing to do. I looked at my wife of twelve long space-age years, and there wasn’t any doubt what I would wish. She looked at me –

As if he had read minds that night, he said, “No use wishing to be rid of someone. Why waste a wish? Make a good one, you heaventrust-ers. The rest follows.” I wondered again, but I concentrated on a new wish. I looked at my wife again. I decided to ask for a long trip from home. My wife looked at me. With distaste. Oh well –

“Now here’s the way it works, folks. All think up a wish and then file by in an orderly way and whisper it to my ear.” He turned a certain part of himself toward the crowd and pointed to his ear, a strange pear-shaped cup in his side. But even my wife was too intent and excited now to be alarmed at his ear; we all accepted it as the best and most normal of things to whisper into. “When you have selected your wish, I will give you the proper tools, all you good people here. The purchase price? Only the simple promise that you will all, each and everyone, wait until midnight to make your wish come true.”

We each filed by and gave the ball ‘man’ our dearest wish and our promise. And he seemed careful about selecting the tools that would make the wishes real. There appeared to be a different set of bright and moving colored things on sticks for each of us. But everyone got the same identical version of a little gray box selected from an opening just down from where he had removed his hat. To each of us he said, handing us the box, “Be careful with this; it is what make all the little movements and bright shapes bring out the dream. Try it at midnight! Uk ukle.”

Well, there we all sat after the last wish had been told to the pear-shaped ear and the jolly ball ‘man’ had retrieved his lid and hat. In a kind of half-drunken stupefaction we watched him quietly fall to the floor and start moving up the aisle in his peculiar inching toddle-roll, until he was gone, quite gone out the nightclub door. Then the freeze of a strange tension settled over all the tables there. We all wondered what we had, how it would work, how we should feel, but none bothered to doubt, I believe, the strange round ‘man’ and his promises. I

know I did not. For it was New Year's Eve, with the spacedripper spirits deluxe, and besides we had sort of got used to the miracles, in this space age of ours. But this Aladdin-like granting of a dearest wish just by color movement hocus-pocus and a tiny gray box – well, it would be a different kind of novelty and might shake up our jaded senses, by now more than a trifle over-satisfied from all manner of wondrous things.

With more than an hour to go my wife and most of the other women had opened their little gray boxes. They were examining the contents, reading into the instructions and fingering the head-harness and the thin strips of heavy leadlike metal. And there was a diagram showing clearly how to adjust the straps and the metal strips to the dream-wisher's head, just before a small plug with many tinelike prongs was inserted into a socket on a sealed compartment of the gray box. CLUTCH FIRMLY THE STICK WITH THE MOVING COLORS AND SHAPES, THINK ONLY OF YOUR DREAM, THEN MAKE THE CONNECTION. So the instructions ran.

It was just a second or so past eleven P. M. in Central time belt when our automatic chief bartender got the call. Another automatic chief bartender, from some place on Long Island, had contacted him through a kind of metal telepathy they've worked out. (None of us knows quite how they do this, although there's many a theory.) After he got the message our 'boy' started acting very strange. He'd whirl up a little way on his flexible track, then cut back the other direction and finally just stop dead on his rail to jitter-jig for a spell; if he had been human I suspect he would have been wringing his hands. I know now he was just trying to figure out some way to tell us the message he had received from Eastern time belt. Oh, no, automatic bartenders can't talk. Whoever would have thought an automatic bartender, or any kind, would need to? Sure, they can listen. For that they come equipped with twenty-five little buttonhole ears conveniently located along the metal knob. And if you want to cry while you tell them, they can nod the knob sympathetically enough and the gears in them will go *clk clk clk*. But they can't talk. No sir, that has been quite properly left out.

But he got us the message all right, and that, together with tests on the strange granules from the sealed compartment of the gray boxes, is why we've been at these space-age civil defenses ever since. – You think these defenses are strange, huh, these acres and acres of concrete with the ball-shaped humps and the holes? And the double rollers – powered to roll both ways – we're throwing up beyond that? And the huge, tons-heavy, steel ball bats circling up on pylons everywhere, swinging constantly 360 degrees from the ground up to a mile. Well, imagine you were a ball, Mister, trying to get somewhere to do damage. Suppose you were from Out There and you and your pals had slipped some

200,000,000 space-ager Americans a wish-box to use at midnight New Year's Eve – indeed, had presented nearly an entire adult population these attractive gifts. And further suppose you and your pals didn't yet realize that you had slipped up concerning the time belts. Wouldn't you be back any day now to claim your base of operations where the strongest Earth nation had, shall we say, wished itself to death? For you see, the tricky part about the wish-box was, when you inserted the tiny plug, strange granules in the sealed compartment acted, reacted, and your head came very quickly off, and messily, to the tune of a big blammy noise. And your wish? Well, in heaven, or somewhere like, let us trust.

What's that? You're wondering what the automatic chief bartender finally did? It was real smart what he finally did, and he and all the other chief bartenders west of the Eastern time belt earned the green-label cluster to their Big-Martini crosses that night. For devotion to humans, far beyond the call. By clicking his rail he sent out the message in an old-fashioned telegrapher's code, over and over he did this, until enough of us got it and warned the rest – WISHES WERE DEATH AT MIDNIGHT E.S.T. Then he broadcast the message, through the metal telepathy, to all the other chief bartenders west from us far as the Pacific Ocean. And they all figured out some way to tell the people and most of the people were saved, except of course those Eastern time belters, who are in heaven, let us pray. Oh, sure, a few women, I understand, in the other time belts went ahead just out of irresistible curiosity strictly female. But my wife? OH NO!

In a Saucer Down For B-Day

The small, two-place saucer came on down; we weren't losing any time. We had heard of this special day and we meant to be there. My driver especially wanted to be in on this; he could hardly believe it. I didn't need to see this to believe it. I was from this place a long, long time ago, and that was why I believed it already. Or partly why. Yes!

"Things have been shut down," I said. "Don't expect normal times. Their gasjoys haven't been running much for several weeks now; the other wheelgos have been stalled on purpose; and the big cloudburping record-run manufacturing places have been taking a holiday. I tell you, it's just a once-a-year thing. But they really go all-out. They don't skimp on that day. They aim to see that everyone gets some, real good."

"Oh jolly joys," he said, "and I've never had any like that! Will I get some?"

"You may. It's according to how it goes, of course, with our landing. You know, after all the landings we've made, there's a lot of them who still won't believe it. They say things like, 'Yah, saw a saucer, he did. U.F.O. HA! Drunken bum! — On the other hand, we might cause a national panic.'"

"Well, if we land O. K., and if there's a possibility I can do it, I want some of that wild stuff, that back-to-nature kind, as they say down there. They claim it's better, has a special tang. Know what I mean?" He leered. I didn't know why he leered. This chap with his thin leathery face all around always seemed to me to be doing that. Or sneering.

So we rode on down saucerwise toward the place where the big day was. And the space slipping through our span-rings would surely have

made old natural God sit up with notice, there was so much of it. Yes, we were coming from a long way out for this thing. But we had the saucer for it and we had the time. That what we were going to see was worth the candle, I'm not so sure. Not for me, anyway. I'd been there a long, long time ago, when every day was such a day, in a certain manner of speaking.

We hovered in quietly and settled on a knob, in a timbery place. No one noticed us, I believe, and truly we had the advantage today of people preoccupied. They did not need a saucer story now to brighten up their day, or to impress the blondes around the office water coolers for the rest of the week. All they needed today was to be out there and in it and get their share of the action. — Later we might break out the small whirly plane we carried knocked down in the saucer and explore their air more extremely. But for now we walked down the hillside casually from the knob and into their valley.

My companion was dressed like a native of this place. (Which gave him a lot of choice!) But what I really mean is he was fixed to look as though he might belong. We had his skinny fibrous legs padded out to look plump and desk-job and certainly a lot too heavy in the thighs, in the normal look here now. We had four of his upper limbs tucked in and tied down to torso nubs, all well-padded and concealed under his bright celebration-day garb. His chest, which was rounded, mounded and stacked on his spare frame, had given us a really tough problem. Oversize to house the huge masses of fiberwebs that "breathed" the rare stuff at his place, it stuck out at home like a hogshead of wine based on two skinny pikes. We had fixed this as best we could now by building him up below and by putting a loose-fitting coat on him. This coat, cut on the wrap-around, was fluff-lined and quilted. In fact in a lot of ways, it was like a short old winter toga might have been on some Caesar a long time back. It was gay-colored, as though for this special day, and in some ways it did very well. In other ways it was the poorest part of the subterfuge. One thing, it made him husky and outsized compared to me, while really he was just a tall skimpy runt alongside my fine meaty form. But this was really of no matter, I guess. Who was paying any attention to forms, people's or otherwise, today? These celebrators were all too intent upon what they had come out to get. — The bubble he had to have because of thick air, when he left the saucer, we camouflaged to look like part of a hat and part of a holiday mask. As for me, about all I had to do was take off my own breathing gear that I used in the saucer and at his place, and I was all right, back home with people! .

YES! there they were! all out in gay holiday attire, some having paid a week's salary to be "dressed appropriately for the occasion." It was holiday, all right, with all the trimmings. The concessionaires were there in droves to profiteer on the naivete and gullibility of their fellow man.

And some were actually selling a product or a service that was wanted. For instance, there was a stand that sold a gimmick that would, as the barker told us over and over, loud, "Put flair in your air today, as you play." It was simply a small mask that had a flavor selector that would fizz scents up the nostrils to the tune of peppermint, oranges, red clover odor – any one of about fifty different, generally pleasant, smells. Cute, I guess you could say for this occasion, but on almost any other occasion, silly.

And of course there would be the other side of all this, and that brought a lot of things back to mind about my people. Yes! another stand, nearby, was selling a mask for which the flavors were all bad – five-weeks-dead sunned horse, slow-decayed old sweet potatoes, ancient shelled goose fruits, barnyard upside-down cakes, rest-room airs – and so on through full fifty flavors of things that were "not so good." And would you believe that this stand was outselling the other stand almost two to one? IT WAS! Because people wanted to see how bad they could endure it, I guess. And there were numerous practical jokes, a lot of shared ha ha and much horseplay that could be done with this mask. Whereas with the other one, the good mask, you were just in there in a small bliss of your own, smelling, say, oranges or vanilla – lonesome.

Then there was one stand selling what I thought of as a new high in gullibility in action. The barker was saying, "Take home some of your joys of today in our airtight savo-sacks, guaranteed non-leak; have some all week." As if any joy could actually be taken home in the thin plastic sacks he was selling, or in any sack for that matter (although these were huge ones) – much less joys that could last all week. Silly man! Silly people! But they tried it, I will say they tried it. Sometimes you would see whole families quitting the holiday together and heading for home, mother, father and children, each with a big plastic savo-sack bouncing along above him, stretched and full till it was clear almost as a clean pane of glass, crammed with air from the barker's pump.

My companion was becoming more excited all the time as we mingled with the gaily dressed throngs and were swept up with the joys and the excesses of the day. "Is this happening all over?" he asked. "Everywhere – here?"

"Perhaps not," I answered. "I just know about this one country. Here it's by Presidential Proclamation each year, and it always comes in very late fall or early winter, when there's the best chance over most of the country for the stuff to be really good and still not be too cold for outdoor enjoyment by most people. And never doubt it! everyone who is possibly physically able, from the lowest to the highest, participates. They're all truly equal out there on this one day, and that's a fact. Equal and free as the air we breathe, as we used to, ha ha, say. – Those who are very old and too sick, I understand, have little savo-sack containers

of it brought up to them, by friends, by relatives, wherever they may be. — It tears my heart out to think how good my people can really be — sometimes — in a last-ditch kind of way. And after it is all too late.”

“What do they do the rest of the time?”

“A large question,” I answered, “a very large question. Some time, if you’re still interested, I’ll take off a dozen or so of our days — the long ones — back home, to tell.”

“No, NO!” He was, I could see, becoming very excited. “I mean what do they do, when they’re not doing like today they’re doing?”

“Oh, you mean what do they do in place of it, the natural kind? They do all sorts of things in place of it, the natural kind. They live in bubble-dome homes now that are controlled, you know. They live in bubble towns now that are controlled also, you know. And when they have to go outside in ‘normal’ times, when the gasjoys are wildly running, when the other wheelgos are madly spinning, when the BIG manufacturing places are burping the big black belches of smother-smoke-and-soot, making those factory record runs — well, they each wear a bubble on the head. Does that explain?”

“You mean they can’t take it without help then?”

“I mean they can’t take it without help then.”

“Sometimes they manufacture it, I’ve heard.”

“Oh, yes. Huge, huge quantities.”

“But today it’s natural and free. How come?”

“Like I said. They’ve been shut down for several weeks in preparation for this big celebration. It comes back, if they’ll let it, fine and clean.”

He looked at me then with the sharp steely cones of his small terrible deep deep eyes. He made a small small sound and it came out “OH!” in the phones of my set that changed him into my language. But I had nothing that would tell me what he was really thinking, though I wished for it strong-on. And I only know that for me for one time-struck instant the whole universe stopped still while his terrible eyes and look held me against a wall. I was very very conscious then, and ashamed, that I was really one of these — ONE OF THESE!

“Let me try it, for, after all I have come a long way for this,” he said slowly, after awhile. “And quickly then let’s be from here.”

So, taking him out of his bubble, I fitted the ancient mask to him, fitted it to the one of his faces that he had told me earlier he would mainly use that day. The mask was the one I had been wearing on that day long ago when the saucer had caught me and had whisked me above the stars. I thought I had adjusted the selector correctly to filter the air out thin for him. But I guess it still came through too thick. And perhaps I had not been able to accomplish the proper seal of the mask to his lean head-form. Two whiffs and he left me — passed-out — cold.

Well, there we were, a padded-up fluffed-out alien passed-out cold, and with him a native come home in a saucer after a long time gone. But we were not too much noticed in the hubbub of the holiday time of many many people filling their lungs and exulting in the tangy outdoor air of this late autumn day. So I quickly fitted his bubble back on him where he lay partly concealed by one of the sideshow tents, adjusted the selector carefully to manufacture his special-thin, threw his spare much-padded body over my shoulder and headed out for the saucer as hard as I could bound. When I arrived back up the hill and on the knob where the saucer was, I threw him in as though he were a rag doll. I climbed in after him and with no time wasted took that saucer into the blue. I was glad that I could space-drive.

A few million miles out and a few minutes gone he waked up enough to grumble, "Silly old silly people – to foul up something natural and good for them – that way." And I started to bristle. After all, these had once been my people, and they were still my people, in a way. But then I thought, and all I could in honesty mutter, after thinking it over, was, in total agreement, "Yes, silly old silly people." Then the saucer, going automatically on hurry-home drive, zoomed on out in real earnest now, and we were headed back from Earth's newest holiday, B-day, or Breathe-Day, or in its original and full designation, GET-OUT-OF-YOUR-BUBBLE-TO-NATURAL-AIR-FOR-A-DAY Day. Silly old silly people....

Let Me Call Her Sweetcore

I had just come in from a hard day of expediting at the power wafer works, and I and Dan the Can were getting settled for one of our usual eventless evenings. I thought.

I was making myself comfortable in a soof-air chair, one with pulsing upholstery that massaged buttocks, thighs and back, and Dan was standing by on his solid square-cornered feet, ready to do what I asked. But soon I saw he wasn't his usual self. When he changed the set of the chair pumps and brought me my somooso pipe and dozoff shoes I noted some strange agitation.

Always fearing for our relationship and wanting to get at the truth-bottom of things at once, I asked, "Something wrong, Dan?"

The lower half of his face crashed open like a scoop ready to dip. "Yoops," he said in the funny grating way sound always came out of him when he was upset. "Somepin' wroong."

"What's wrong then, Dan?"

"At's Noona. I bea woontin' her. Ever since I saw her in a shoop, yesterday when we strooled, I bea woontin' her."

"But Dan!" I said, amused and alarmed at the same time. "Is this Noona someone like you?"

"Noops. She's a - a - well, I guess yoo'd say she's a goorl."

"Sure, of course. But is she - well, is she a manufactured article like you? I mean, Dan, is she mechanical?"

Dan's protruding eyes that usually glowed a kind of deep red when he was feeling right changed to purple-blue. With those weird beams he looked straight at me. He didn't answer my question, but he laughed

a screechy laugh that sent shivers over my body. "Heepa heepa heepa," it sounded.

"Change the air, Dan!" I shouted to reestablish my mastery. "Set the needle on tired man's roll, the way you know I always want it when I'm done with businessman's come-home." He moved sluggishly toward the pumps.

"Brisk, Dan!" I snapped. "Get it done." He moved then with speed that rattled the floor. "And another thing, Dan. Remember, you and I have been the perfect relationship for four years now. Or, in other words, ever since I obtained you from the government robot pool and started to work at the state wafer factory. Through all the working day I help make wafers to feed your ever-demanding power maw; you burn those wafers to serve me. Most of the human emotions are gone from me now. Thank God you never had any. We live the great life, Dan, we function. Why should we be cluttering the works with this Noona?"

"Amusement," grated Dan. "Foon. Looove, too. Besides I get loone-some when you're oop at the wafer factory all day."

"Dan!" I almost screamed, so surprised was I that he should speak so. "Do we not play chess or checkers every night, emotionless games that give our steel-sharp minds a chance to function? Do I not let you sit in the rolling soof-air chair when you want to? Though for the life of me I don't know why you, with your steel shell, want to. Do I not feed you your power wafers every day promptly at the hour we begin our evening? In short, Dan, are you not one of the best-cared-for robots in town?"

"Need Noona!" he bellowed his reply. "Saw her inna shoop yesterday when we strooled. Saw that loovely name in raised loomps on her chest! Saw her firm hoord legs as she bent to pick up a sack, yesterday when we passed."

Then he started making the gestures that always brought me to my feet. He raised up the hinged section of his chest and threatened to tear out his heart, or, more specifically, the core where the power wafers digested. "Don't, Dan," I pleaded, as I always did. "That would kill you. And I need you — need you to give my life a meaning. Or more accurately, perhaps, I require your presence to make my life's non-meaning bearable. Anyway —"

"Goo see Noona," he suggested as a kind of ultimatum while his steel fingers played with the core where the wafers digested.

"Go see Noona," I promised, not knowing how else to save Dan. "Tomorrow. I'll take off work."

Next morning I arose from my bed that had the roko-pulse mattress with the exciting big spongy knobs and the tingly-lined holes, and I

went to see Dan who was standing like a steel rock, firmly planted beside the soof-air chair. I feared that he had stood all night there in a kind of trance, dreaming metal dreams of Noona.

"Good morning, Dan," I said, checking his power unit.

He replied, "Goob morning," in a normal voice that made me have hopes that we would not have to go see his girlfriend after all. But near the end of my breakfast Dan clumped over to stand beside me. "Goo see?" he asked, letting metal fingers idly flicker up and down past the place where his chest would come open.

"Yes Dan," I said, trying to smile, "a promise is a promise. And of course I want to see Noona too."

"Goob. I like you." And he caused his fingers to stop making those threats.

After breakfast I pushed the emergency leave button for time off from work, and the wafer factory sent up a green positive-reply flare from the Time-Clock building. So we started, led by Dan.

He clumped and rattled along almost at a run. He seemed entirely confident of his direction as we went past the power wafer plants, the rocket mills and many factories where machines were being whammed together by other machines at terrific pace amidst great noise. I did not remember going past these places yesterday, but Dan did not seem to be lost. And when we got to the place he sought, a shop in the big-number streets far from the main part of town, I understood. We had been there yesterday, but we had come by a different route.

"No woonderin' by the river and woostin' time this time," said Dan. "I coom today by the way I like. Short."

We went into a littered place where a small man sat by himself. There was something defeated in the way the arms pulled the shoulders down and trailed along the chair sides, dumping hands toward the floor. His eyes were tragic, and when he spoke it was in a voice that hurried to have done with what it had to say.

"Hear noise?"

We heard it, a tappity-rap and rattle sound surely locked in a closet somewhere, or maybe in a basement under us. "When you don't hear it, it'll be all over. Don't care. Did all I could. Wouldn't listen."

"Who? What?" I blurted.

"Noona," he cried. "Committing suicide. Now. Hammering at the locks I put on. She'll get them. Nothing can seem to stop the crazy force she's working for now. But I don't care now."

"But why? What?"

"Something from yesterday. Couldn't understand. Good up to then, good functional. Helped in this parts store. Helped me to prosper. I could buy more wafers. She could help me more. It was a good arrangement. Then yesterday - Something passed in the street!"

"Noona!" Dan shrieked. "Don't do it! Here's loove!" And he pounded across to a place in the floor and stamped hard on the boards. A hidden door sprang up. "Don't!" Dan screamed again, and he went to his knees to peer into the dark basement hole. But the pounding continued that sounded like a hammer tapping a chisel.

I could see that each tap tore at Dan's power core and almost ripped him apart. I felt sorry for Dan the Can then, but soon I admired him. For once he had made his decision he hardly wasted a tick. He leaped through the air like a dedicated being and fell several feet to the cement floor of that basement hole. I heard him hit, and it sounded like dumping scrap at the mill. I shuddered.

When the noise of Dan's landing cleared away, the tapping noise seemed louder for a moment. Then it stopped altogether. New sounds took its place, the smallest of scratchy noises down in that basement dark, like metal sections being tenderly opened on hinges that made almost no noise. Through this were the two soft words, Danny, — Noona, said with a strange metallic tenderness. Then they came up in each others arms.

The shopowner could hardly believe what he saw. His eyes became strangely bright when he saw them embrace.

Then a petty anger shone through the tragedy in them. "Worse than death!" he screamed at Noona, who definitely was a girl robot with steel ringlets to her head and roundnesses at the right places. "Worse than if you'd torn out your power wafers!"

"Did doo," said Noona smiling a simperish, half-embarrassed smile out of her square, shining face.

"Did too," echoed Dan smiling worse than a bridegroom as he raised his chest's hinged part. "We're soo much a part of each oother."

Then I saw what they had done! They had exchanged power cores.

"Well, whatta ya know!" I blurted, and the shopowner yelled, "Hell's hinges, this will kill them both."

Noona of course came home to live with Dan and me, since the shopowner said he no longer had any use for her, couldn't trust her now anyway.

In the days that followed I saw how much the man was right in predicting disaster for the metal love birds. Noona and Dan, after a few weeks of dallying and toying with each other's metal sections and being enamored with each other's nearness, became, like almost any other married pair, bored and snappish with each other. And I, remembering my own less-than-successful marriage of many years ago, watched with bitter amusement as these two, with desires horribly mixed, tried to dominate one another. I knew something must soon give way.

It happened one cold March evening, about six months after the nuptials of Noona and Dan.

I had called eight times for Dan to come change the chair massage from businessman's come-home to home-owner's bounce-around, and he hadn't obeyed. I went after him. I met him coming from the back beige room where he and Noona had quarters; his scoop-shaped face was twitching so that it shook his eyes. "I hate hate hate her!" he screamed. "But she has noo power power oover anthing now. I'm glad." He was clutching his power core in his metal fingers, having ripped it from Noona's chest! "I'm my own can now."

"But Dan," I cried, "you can't use two! Take Noona back her power, then we'll turn her out of this house. We'll go back to our functional living. We'll be through with emotion and this silly love and stuff."

"Noo," shrieked Dan as he ripped her power from his chest. He clapped in his own and threw hers out the window; it landed in a garbage pail. "Damn Noona!" he continued, still shrieking. "She's rooned my life. But I have looved her - I could never stand to see her with another."

"Let's go adjust the massage and be like old times," I suggested.

So we did, after awhile. And after many weeks Dan seemed almost to forget that tragic period when he had been slave to Noona and love's sickening emotions. Now our days are spent, much the same as before Noona, among the clean-cut little victories of functional living. Eight hours I work at the power wafer factory so that I may earn enough wafers to power Dan the Can for eight hours of game-playing and care in the soof-air chair. Eight hours I sleep. And Noona just lies in the back beige room, cold, alone, without any power, waiting for some master tinkerer in robots I suppose to come and repair her. Dan and I hardly ever mention her name as we grow quietly older, so assured, so unbothered, coolly living our never-changing functional routine.

But sometimes when the moon shines down a certain way on the wafer factory roofs and there is a soft touch of valentine weather in a pink and peaceful time, and steel lovers sing to their steel ladies in the big entertainment panels in the wall, I see Dan get that funny look. Then I say, "Dan, you've been working too hard again, Dan; time for your vacation again, Dan." And before he reacts to stop me I rush over to jerk out his power wafers - to save him from - well, to save him from his foolish foolish self.

In the Jag-Whiffing Service

I had always said there was an easier way. And I think, when we invade, I'll be proved right. But you know how things get started, and how powerful tradition can be and how old-line thinking can keep people, even a whole planet, in a rut.

The big cargo saucers were getting bigger each year, what with the growing popularity of the jag-whiff places, and the jag-whiff places themselves were growing in number with more and more people going "on the jag" because – well, partly because – of troubles in the sky, like strange balls whirling around and unexplainable objects going *beep* and *wuff* and *wuff wuff*. We of the saucers had slipped past these first baby objects O.K. and knew they were just little old harmless ping-pongs that chattered a little now and then like a greeting going past. But tell the people that! They'd throw a big glass on one of the whirlers and see spikes sticking out and maybe a big pair of eyes inside and a nose and a long red tongue hanging down. "They Earthits!" they'd scream like they'd just fallen into one of the hot canals, and they'd race off to a jag-whiff jag like Judgment-Day-of-Sins itself was after them. And the funny part of it is, I guess the people were right being scared like that, the way things turned out.

But is it any wonder we were having to increase the size of the saucers to space-haul all that jag-whiff up through the rattleballs? And a big reason makes me think it could have been done more efficiently, we were having to take so much junk stuff, extra accessories I guess you'd call it, to get the jag-whiff. Our Earthit contacts were always giving us the old breeze about cost of labor, cost of materials, improvement in

design and next year's inventories. Apparently the dealers didn't understand at all what the play was with us, because they'd give us so much blab-blab that didn't apply, all about futuristic design and about how one jag-whiffer machine had it all over another jag-whiffer machine, which to us didn't mean a thing. And we didn't talk, because we'd heard already how some Earthits feared the saucers, and how some Earthits said they didn't exist at all, and how some other Earthits were on the fence, saying maybe they did maybe they didn't, so what? and how there was wide fear and great unrest among the Earthits in general. And when it's like that, and you're a possible source of the wide fear and unrest, a whole planet full of people can easily decide they don't want any part of contributing to your pleasure.

And that's what the jag-whiff was to us actually, pleasure. Back home when our troubles had us down, or maybe we just felt like raising a little dust, we'd go to a jag-whiff place. We'd plunk down our pay-pictures, and the whiff-tender would wheel out one of those black rings, which they have to keep under special pressures in our climate. Then he'd screw on the tube with the face piece and we'd take our whiff and something out of the black ring — just seemed like real thick chest filler to me — would spread all through to the farthest reaches of our breath bags and go into our blood and suddenly all five of our eye sticks would start whirling and focusing and zeroing-in for dames and our arms and legs would start a kick and a slap dance, enough to shake the planet down. And when our face spines and head tubes would go into that special sharp buzz of contentment, we'd know we were on our jag, full and warm and happy with as much pleasure as any Martian is ever supposed to know. But we never revealed the play to our Earthit contacts, just slipped in at night in our noiseless saucers with all lights dimmed, cleared our cargo tubes of the tons of pay-picture we'd brought (green copy of the Earthits' currency) and took on as many of the gleaming jag-whiffer machines as our cargo tubes would hold.

But it is ten years now since a jag-whiffer captain has steered his saucer through the whirling balls. It got so the satellites would drum on the saucer from a long way out. Deafening! Dreadful! We saw what was coming and we tried to beat it. We saucered around the clock for a while trying to stockpile enough jag-whiff to last us. But of course we couldn't. We are about out of it now, and our land is strewn with the glittery shells that were once attached to the black tubes of the jag-whiff.

And it could all have been done so different. I'm sure it could. That stuff wasn't just in the tubes of the jag-whiffer machines down there, I'm convinced of that. That stuff may have been all around us down there. I believe it was. But our government would insist we get into

these suits, about so far out, you see, about the time we'd start contacting the rattle balls. And they threatened us with removal of the contacts if we broke the rules about the suits. In addition to that, they said we'd die anyway. So you see how life can be – grim and fuzzy, and unsafe most of the time. And to make things even more uncertain, just because they couldn't duplicate the product we were hauling, our scientists got uppity and ignored the whole problem. Except to run off to the jag-whiff places of course to ease their frustrations, which they did plenty often when they thought they wouldn't be seen.

But when we invade down through there, which we plan to do soon now, with our special equipment to catch and explode the whirlyballs, I think we're going to find out plenty. Among other things, I think we're going to find out that the stuff we cargoed up here at such great cost, that was so inefficiently packaged, is all around us down there. I think when we take over down there, with the right filtering equipment, jag-whiffing may become as common and economical as breathing. And another thing, I think we're going to find out we were taken for quite a ride by the Earthits with their silly way of packaging jag-whiff. Imagine having to buy all that chrome and steel, guaranteed to go over one hundred miles per hour, just to get four little black rings of whiff. And for all the Earthits talked about it, the rings with the white sidewalls didn't whiff one bit better than the others!

First Day, First Job, Girl

They brought us in to the sounds of happy big plant tunes as the music crashed up and out. The building's high front wall played us through as though it were all for a ball. A workers' BIG happy ball! An eight o'clock May sun flashed orange on those stones that seemed polished brown as we moved through where a green "dream of a lawn" had the walkways lined "like a picture" through pampered grass. Ahead of me, I CLEARLY remember, was a blue-and-gold girl who bounced and whose novelty shoes, it turned out (when later she put them on her desk to show me), each had a swimming fish in it. YES! A hollow place for water in each of her clear plastic wedgie shoes, just forward of her heel's central point, was "home" where a goldfish swam in these novelty, Novelty, NOVELTY! oh-help-me-be-novel times. ("Small for Oceans.") I mused it as though I dreamed.

But real-and-there for now and up ahead on the walk was a near-to-ending man, thin crisp steel-wires old guy who did not tremble, but who battle-moved on his step tries as though each were some grand planned assault upon the Hated Distances. To be brief: very crippled he was, high-up skinny tall and old. He had a piled-weight shoe on one foot, a small stylish wedge on the other, and he hoisted everything along with a leverage of canes grim and black. (Days later I saw those canes in a corner and viewed them very closely. On each of them, so it chanced, were two decoration snakes crossed over and looped back, each snake with an angry tongue out of its head a long way and having a spitty-mad go at its cane-partner in a pose of pure-poison rancor.) A fast look and a fleeting thought as I fled through the green lake of grass

that first morning had but convinced me that the grim old man's grim canes were both carved and embellished with some curving designs and taperings that seemed like tails far down toward each cane's barrel end.

("Did you...see!?")

We had both passed by the struggler at about the same instant, the three of us together for a space-lock in time, just an interval on the wide stone-set walk down the too-good-to-be-true prize grass. Just for a tiny-tiny of time, locked. Then the two of us out there alone on the walk headed in to the brown wall....

("See what!?")

We kept on until we were honored by a guard who in stylized jerky gestures waved us on and in – with automaton arms and hands not thinking of us at all, I remember thinking. (Was it a robot guard, or a guard turned robot!? I could only ask and wonder.) And soon we were at the brown wall. She went first, I a scant step behind; and after a long wait in a crowded space, we bruised in an elevator against each other and many people as we soared up to the level where offices were supposed to be. When we got to our big office room, a lean crisp steel-wires old man was posed at a desk and you knew, just KNEW without "knowing" it that under the desk was a shoe with about four inches of layer work on it too many and a small stylish wedge on the other foot. And somehow all this poor show was Boss!? But yes! he looked like Boss from the desk up, especially where he was seated behind heavy polished office ware as he stared at us straight and gray, no-compromise, no-nonsense; and yet, one perceptive at all, I believe, would correctly understand how this man was just a little bit scared all the time too that some brash nonconformist smart-ass new-boy might challenge the Show, and what would poor steel-wires do then? crippled old fake-out phony facade all these years! And you wondered, just conjecturing on a little tight-wire tight-walk rim of your mind guessing, if it could possibly all at all be worth it to him for him to sit there day after day after day and suffer so just to do it a little bit on new-boy and old-boy and middle-boy, or try to. Then you remembered the two contrasting shoes, entirely gone to den now under the heavy black desk, as you, glancing idly, apprehensively, saw the snake canes in the corner, and suddenly all in a very split instant you felt a beam of light crash down and as it pierced you, tight-thought and cold, you KNEW, yes knew! that YES! to him it was worth it. Entirely! worth it all. Oh, worth it and worth it and worth it yes yes yes yes in his deformity, in his frustration, in his hates, damned damaged and continually human being.

"How did he...!?"

"How did he what?" she said. "Oh...how did he beat us? you're wondering. I'll tell you how he beat us. He beat us with a trick. He

came up the little blue executive elevator. A special job. Just for him and those like him. You see? They go down under the stairs and then whiz up in that advantage. We cannot beat them. And even if we did, the doors would all be locked. — So who wants to?" she asked.

"I DO!" And suddenly I wanted to beat everybody and everything, looking at her so goldy and cool and blue and bouncy and vital and beautiful there in that tight-protocol, no-nonsense big-office mess. And all at once also I had this almost irresistible clean urge to sidestep quickly in my best basketball fake-em-out-from-under-their-game-plan fade, drop my lunch sack to the floor, put both hands firmly on the bottom edge of her wonderful crisp blue skirt and give a quick heave upward just to see if all things under were as neat and tidy and trim as I could imagine they should be, looking at this all from the outside, so cool and blue and smooth and neat (YEAH! — highly evocative and very nice-fitting!). I could imagine the taut azure straps straining across her tight tanned thighs to hold up her fine dark beige nylons well, and her undergarment-not-to-mention, I supposed, yes! supposed very much, would be blue, very new and clean and pale blue with double or triple or even quadruple thicknesses at places of stress, the doubling or tripling or quadrupling of thicknesses making darker blue there. And her brassiere, positive and perky as two big loaded orange halves ready to squirt me, would be of the same heavenly pale blue hue, I just knew it! (And I was equally sure, with my boy-scout sureness, I shouldn't be thinking any of this at all!)

At about this point, I remembered this terrible true scientific horrible awful fact out of a grade school textbook that told me how we are all always exuding vapor, many many gallons of it in the long run of a year — shooting vapor out of all our holes, the littlest ones and the others, and without wanting to I saw her there then with her dress up over her head in all those wonderful blue and beige feminine things merely giving off steam and being entirely a vapor ball — a whole hundred hundred huge huge steam kettles worth of it coming in the course of her life from all the holes all the time as long as she should live, and I would be steaming too, and the Boss would be also, for all that he looked so dry and done and incapable of it now, and when he said, "NEWMAN!" I instinctively and in a fog, quite shaken really, yelled a really steam's up, "YES! SIR!"

I thought hurriedly of fish swimming slow and trapped then in her lively wedgie shoes (oh, how small for oceans!), of his horribly unmatched recobbled old dead shoes, hidden now, and a big ball of stress-and-distress steam going off from everyone, everywhere, her holes and my holes and his holes and everyone's holes, and all of us surely dying a little, running down, losing steam! even as we stood there or sat there, and the days of our vapor diminishing just a little all

the time All The Time, ALL THE TIME! and nothing we could do or anyone could do to stop it even a little or even slow it...at all...at all...at all...AT ALL...EVER... (SO...we steam on...and on...and do the very best that we can!)

But it was about at this point that the steel and wires old guy cleared his throat quite with the reality and the tension demanded of the time and the location, the blue-and-gold girl with her dress beautifully still-in-place, and her fish gracefully aswim in her shoes, went behind a medium-size, and I thought, somewhat impersonal office desk stocked with two big baskets of company-office-business papers for her to rummage through; and I, Mr. Newboy, (yet Mr. Nobody-boy [almost] to the Firm for now), stood completely at loose ends for the time, pumping my steamy toes in my sweaty "office cowboy" boots, but determined to untrack and have, with proper instructions, a firm real GO at this THING for a while, with all my steam through all their steam as hard as ever I could do it for as long as my steam should last! YES! (And HURRY: HURRAH!! The very first morning of my very first day on my very first real job was finally due to begin to start cooking up some steam.)

In the Empire

Oh, we used to have good times in the empire, the empire of John Bradley (SOME-Deal) Deale, to be exact. There were always the bowling scores to discuss and doughnuts to go and get, and coffee and tea, and the payday every two weeks, the semi-detached waiting, and sometimes at this mapping and information agency for the government one of us would have a baby. Then it would be the passing out of cigars and lighting up all the time, and slapping of backs until lunch break, and yelling and horsing around all afternoon until almost time to secure. — HERE COMES PAPA, whatta man! How's the wife and kid doing? Another girl (boy) — good for you! — And then it would be back again to the semi-detached waiting, the eyes of each searching casually for a weakness in a co-worker, some cracking up, some inability to wait it out with dignity and always seem in place at this mapping and information agency for the government. And sometimes we had an assignment at this government installation, I won't say we didn't.

And one time we had this project. They walled off an area, isolated it with black curtains, brought some men up from another floor — compilers, they called them! put up a big sign that said AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY, TOP SECRET PROJECT, and were in business. Then it was just John Bradley (SOME-Deal) lounging back in his little corner office at his desk in the corner of a corner of his empire, right where I could see him and he could see me when I happened to look up from my semi-detachment of doing nothing, or my full detachment of reviewing an old training-phase compilation. Sometimes I would glance into the hollow blue of his almost wholly faked gaze of discernment,

and I would shudder. Because I would know he was trying to consider me in his main and eternal pastime of personnel assessment and character evaluation.

Well, John B. (SOME-Deal) Deale was coordinator of this big TOP SECRET thing, and he was the only one from our floor who could go behind the black curtains for a peek at our TOP SECRET compilation. It was a show to watch him walk, wading through the flaps of the opening – very detached stride, casual hands in casual lead-blue suit pockets, elbows crooked just so, shoulders up like tired eagles lighting – and after about fifteen minutes watch him come wading back through the flaps, a kind of hollow-nothingness gaze on his face now, as if he had just seen the awesome and had withstood it. I sitting pretending beside an old training-phase compilation would gather – what else could I think? – that GS-12 John Bradley (SOME-Deal) Deale had just gazed upon things almost too secret for God himself to know.

So we went on waiting while this big TOP SECRET thing shaped up behind the black curtains, and again there were only the bowling scores to discuss, and the doughnuts to go and get, and the coffee or the tea, and the waiting the two weeks out until the minor excitement of payday. With a difference now. Out from the black-curtain area those compilers from another unit would swagger and stand looking at us like we were cold spit on the floor, and then they would gaze all around our area as if seeing everything clearly in a kind of blanket stare and evaluating everything correctly in a kind of God's judgement just before ambling on up to get their doughnuts, and their coffee or tea, with the sure walk of Captains to the snack bar.

But it was SOME-Deal himself stopping by my work table in his lead-blue suit of very detached and casual cut who broke the monotony one day, just cracked it wide with a startling statement, quiet and level out of his gray mouth, and the cold-water wavering of his blue eyes past me in no real look. "Our project is on the point of being completed. Tomorrow. On time!" He waved a little half-hitch gesture of blue-lead shoulder – casual hands in casual pockets, thumbs outside – relaxed – at the black-curtain place and waited. Not knowing what else to do, and dedicated to the principle, when truly in doubt do something, I suddenly exploded, "That's fine! Congratulations! Great day! We made it! I knew we could!" Then I went back to dormant, as befit my status there, and stolidly and industriously I pretended to be interested in nothing but the review of an old training-phase compilation.

Came the morrow they carried the project out past the black curtains, just whisked it by us with no ceremony at all, two little folders and something that might have been a small map board done up in a canvas rag. The compilers were gone from our floor now, the black curtains came down, the signs that said AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY,

TOP SECRET PROJECT were removed and the secured place was no more. Some of us got up from our doughnuts and coffee or tea and strolled back there very casually, not seeming to care at all whether we went or not, to have a look at what had been the walled-off security place and the big TOP SECRET project. The area was completely empty now except for a table and four chairs, and in the middle of a place where the floor looked swept there sat a lumpy brown paper sack with the words CLASSIFIED WASTE scrawled on it in orange-red letters.

Seeing, or rather, feeling a shadow at my left elbow, I turned slowly and looked full into the cold-water eyes of GS-12 John Bradley (SOME-Deal) Deale. His blue-lead suit looked pressed that day; his tie was an orange sound. "Yes, we finished up on time," he said, walking the words level and straight out of his gray mouth, "made our due-date for Production Control." Then, as if making some final supreme effort at friendliness, he did his false-face grin, just pursed the lips up some until the teeth showed, and he did the very minimum things with the face muscles, all of which was his patented, very individual, controlled way of not smiling. He said, "I'll go in for my 13 now, I should imagine. Completed this TOP SECRET thing on time as well as kept our own work humming in the unit." Slowly, as if deeply thinking and burdened, he turned and walked straight and machine-like away, hands a little too stiff at the elbows, I thought, in casual pockets, back to his corner office to his desk in a corner of the corner, and, poised, he sat looking out at his empire, his suit pads up like dull blue shoulders of eagles, his cold-water eyes not saying yes or no that I could be really sure of while we had our fifth morning coffee-break over again in a kind of tribute to the excitement.

But I was shaken, after I bothered to think about it. Yes, I was. Near the middle of the afternoon, after mulling it over through several doughnut sessions interspersed with generous intervals of trying to look like a real employed civil service worker, I got up and shot straight and true to the desk in the corner of a corner of the empire. I put my balled fists hard on the desk of John Bradley, and though I was shaking some and truly aware of the unorthodox show I was making, I resumed our conversation. "What happens to the compilers, now that they've wrapped our TOP SECRET project up on time and gone home to their units?"

He came up from something he was doing with a paper clip in what must have been a far corner of his desk drawer, and I saw his eyes had a strange smooth frost in them that I had not before known of. "They will be taken care of by their unit supervisor," he said, jumping the words at me like warnings. "Their unit supervisor will prepare some adequate comment of commendation and cause that to be placed on a card in each man's permanent folder. That unit supervisor will probably get a

grade-raise also for being able to carry on in his unit with key personnel absent on Special Projects." He looked at me with a kind of dare in his eyes, or maybe a dogged defense for the rightness of all things promotion-wise in a really well-built civil service empire, and then he said quite coldly, "It will go on your record and be placed on a card in your permanent folder if you do not return to your work area immediately and resume your cartographic duties at once!"

Resume my cartographic duties at once? What cartographic duties? I came back to my work area, looked at the bare drafting table for awhile, and finally I suggested to a co-worker, cleaning and clipping his nails for about the fifth time that day, that we go for doughnuts and coffee. He thought it a fair suggestion, so we ambled toward the snack bar, rediscussing the league bowling scores and when would we get a grade raise, if ever. "SOME's getting another one," I said, and the co-worker said, "He is?"

"Yes, because he finished that project up on time. You know, the one behind the TOP SECRET curtains. As well as kept the work humming in the unit."

"Made his due-date, huh," the co-worker said, not even thinking, I could tell, "as well as kept the work hum - ?" And then he stopped dead in his tracks, jerked and looked alive for a moment as something cold and thought-like must have hit him in the head. And I reckoned maybe there was still hope, though God knew where, or for whom.

Awareness Plan

Hilua was a long man, thin and metal-sharp. With stomach flat as a reptile's he sat at his copper-colored desk in the State Building and had plans. He was number one.

Lofa was a sturdy man, his shoulders broad, his stomach round. Sometimes, at a certain view, the way he sloped into his thighs and his guardsman's long boots, Lofa reminded some men of a top about to spin. Men never said this, however, to Lofa, because Lofa was at times a hard man, though mostly a fantastic dreamer, some held. But he and Hilua made quite a team at the State Building. Lofa was number two.

The State Building was pretty much as the name said. And it was Supreme Headquarters for the wide-spreading services of Awareness Plans. Hilua had long been chief of Awareness and Lofa had long been his lieutenant. Sometimes these two disagreed almost completely on how best to carry out their assignments. But usually from some deep-set regard for one another's position they came to amiable agreement in the end, and the results, generally, were good.

"Lofa," Hilua was speaking in his captain's authoritative voice, "from Filtragon, our headquarters of assignment, we have an assignment. It is a medium-large assignment and will call for our best planning. — Here is the best plan."

Lofa shifted his turnip shape a little and spun two small quarter arcs where he stood in front of Hilua's gleaming desk. — Here is the best plan! Just like that. — Hilua was so preoccupied with the incontestable rightness of "the best plan" that he almost failed to notice Lofa's agita-

tion. But he noticed in time and he thought, since it would cost nothing, he might as well placate his sub-commandant.

"In Lorantan," Hilua continued, speaking more softly now, "that pleasant province in North Laparan, where we vacationed last April, there is need of an Awareness Plan. Remember how the people there were getting that moon look in their faces and that rock-solid seat to their sitting? Remember how they lay on their beds smiling all the time, just smiling – even when the homage people went through the towns? Remember how when the gorgeous metal flowers came through the yard holes in Lorantan last spring, to celebrate Consolidation Day and World Victory Hour, the Lorantanos did not rise to the occasion? And when the tin Birds swam the colored-vapor air in Maximum Diversion Company's great Shape Display, staged to honor World Supremacy Times, the Lorantanos just lay and dozed, not looking at the Birds, not thinking of the Birds. Even when the up-up music of empire played, from invisible orchestras swung between giant gas bags of silk in the beautiful pink air over Lorantan, did these torpid subject people rise and sing? Hah! They did not. – Recall, oh recall!" and Hilua's voice was vibrant now, "how when the Supreme One's best political disk recited eloquence through the land these grinning nothing-folk did not rise from their beds or their pleasant sitting to rap out any hand-claps! Do you not remember, Lofa, how the Lorantanos were dead to all things but ease and pleasant smiling? Entirely passive, they gave their conquerors no respect, no regard, no recognition whatsoever. Oh yes, they'd accepted the pleasant living of our technology with a smile, smile, smile! But would they wave flags? Hah! No flags! – Lofa, if you remember, then you know what our problem is. How many Awareness machines, and which ones, would you dispatch there?"

Lofa beamed at once and glowed with the look of a subcommandant suddenly promoted to supreme chief. "I remember well the Lorantanos," he said. "Ah well. Their plight has haunted me day after day on my duty assignments among the lesser tribes. I have longed for this assignment. I have prayed to all the blue and gold new satellites; I feel about these great people strongly; I wish to help them. – Before it is too late!"

Hilua leaned forward a little at his copper-colored desk, his flat-as-a-reptile's stomach eased into the concave velvet of the kidney curve. Only a few times, or maybe never before, had he seen Lofa act so stirred. Hilua was becoming more than ever convinced that his lieutenant could act the sentimental idiot as well as be almost a complete fool when it came to tactical affairs. And Hilua was more than ever glad, for the good of the Consolidation, that there were such trusty clear-eyed men as he, Hilua, for the top spots.

Disregarding, indeed not noticing, the contemptuous condescending smirk of his chief, Lofa launched into his plan. "I would take no less than five thousand machines," said Lofa. "In other words, I would take a thousand each of the Basics. The Intricates are for a people far less gone than the Lorantanos. With my five thousand Basics I would fan out in a C curve until I sat on the ridges hemming all Lorantan to the coast. There I would sit quietly through the day and the Lorantanos would not see me, sleeping as they smile and waking as they smile, vacant as all the Automatics they are served by. When night came I would open with no less than a thousand Blams. With maximum intensifiers on the muzzles I would sit back and point them at the sky. For a full hour. While that bedlam was yet echoing off the pink vapor shield that is Lorantan's provincial trademark now, I would come in with the thousand Phewsos. Awakened by the Blams, with at least half a smile erased now, for at least thirty minutes the vacant ones must come to terms with reality again and know again that stench that lies just a few dead days and skin's depth beneath the surface of all life's conquered things. Next I would open with my thousand Starstandos with reflectors and burn the countryside with light, followed closely by the Sanders shelling the air with grits and jagged glass."

"You have used four thousand Basics," said Hilua. "And you pointed your Blam guns at the sky! Are you through now with your jesting?"

"No, not quite through," said Lofa, beaming Hilua as much of a dark frown as he thought he safely could. "And if you read but jest in my words, you are misunderstanding. The remaining thousand Basics are a thousand Dispensereros for me and my men. We shall sit back on the high ground on the C curve around Lorantan and drink to our great victory. If the Commandant will trouble to notice, Sir, you will notice, Sir, that the Lorantanos have been given back four senses in my Awareness Plan. Count them! The Blams brought back their ears; the Starstandos returned them their eyes, the Sanders with grits and jagged glass made them feel again; and of course the Phewsos cleared the nostrils of all. They can think now, and suffer. Is it not enough? And perchance many will come to awareness sufficiently to crawl to us. Forgetting for awhile the Automatics and the wonderful dead life of having everything served-as-planned, perhaps they shall taste a drink with us, straight out of my Dispensereros. And afterwards, being restored to full awareness and capability for fear, they'll give out tons of respect to their conquerors; they'll remember the hand-claps, Sir, when the Supreme One's best political record plays!"

In the cold silence of no-answer Lofa looked into the blue-ice gaze of his Captain and felt himself shrinking back into the perfect picture of the useful subcommandant — gross, sturdy, a little sub-par in the big-decision department, not quite gifted enough by nature to author the super-plan, even a little sentimental at times, perhaps. Silent and aloof

now, as befit a Supreme Commandant of Awareness Plans, Hilua handed Lofa his orders. And the sub-commandant accepted these orders almost gracefully, with just the merest twitch into two quarter arcs of spin before he saluted crisply, spun on his heel and went away regarding the brief directive that began: "To implement the Awareness Mission to Lorantan with all good dispatch speed one Super Blasto...." Lofa's eyes blurred and he could read no farther. He did not need to.

A Small Miracle of Fishhooks and Straight Pins

Char was a big dog, black as a Tarbaby, but he seemed pleasant enough with a gay plaid pancake cap stitched to the fur of his head, and a bright chain tied to a red plastic band, and the long tongue of him, fuzzy and very scarlet, lolling down. He was the one thing among all of Daphalene's toys that I had not tampered with, had not fixed for lessons. Daphalene? Daphalene was my daughter Daphalene, a cute baby-girl child with blond ringlets and a stomach ball-slight over the band of her training pants, and a dour sweet squint as she looked up at me with love, and her mother dead-to-me two years.

Yes, being her one parent left, mother-and-father now, staunch and adamant-true, I had fixed the other toys in the interest of Daphalene's training — pins sticking out of the dollies, and fishhooks in the stuffed things to stick her, and a special strong spring on the jack-in-the-box to slap her head when she played. Also, over all toys was a syrupy stickum, light gum that would itch and burn slightly, and be on the hands black and adhesive, like handling the fresh-cut end of a Christmas tree. Yes, I wanted Daphalene to hurt early and well while playing, to learn that pain comes easily, flowing freely from Everything; she must form that hard crust NOW! Sometimes I thought of her as a fresh little wound in the world, so vulnerable to the harsh grains and grits, her freshness needing to be scabbed and grayed over. For her safety. Yes, I wanted her to be READY FOR THE WORLD.

But I wanted her to know love too. Within these baby shells that go across our times of horror must be the seed of love still. Else what? Inside the tended scars we rear to walk more confidently across our

planned damnation must be the heart of love kept back, but kept like some deep-buried seedlet ready to sprout, the debris being cleared from the ground, and the sun and the rain coming right again.

So the black dog – I wanted her to love the black dog. “He is my best toy,” she would say, giving Char a joyful squeeze and lugging him about the dust-balled two-room apartment, where no woman was, where the poor-housekeeper wife had been briefly, briefly-and-long, to leave me with this challenge to the world, a wee thing to cherish and to train in my practical kindness. And my love. – She would carefully circle all the other toys while she hugged the huggable Char. She would laugh a gay chortle until I would glare at her from my dusty chair. She would know then that she had had her time with the easy dog. It was time to be going among harsh, useful toy lessons again.

It was a cold spring night. There was a Good Friday moon, full and pale, through the cracked pane of my high-up northwest window. I was alone. I had read some in some dull work of ancient charmless stories that should never have been told and had turned sleepy in my chair. Daphalene I could hear in the other room, tossing and turning in her high crib as she slept. So this young spring tosses and turns and waits, I thought, waits high up and restless to flower black ice-flowers into the iceberg world, when the frost comes out of its time. So oh-how-many-millions of girls babies wait fitfully in their strange chemistry, to flower ice-hearted ice babies into this glacial age, with ice hearts of men, until sometime that heart coldness must surely freeze along all the world’s gray tubes until all is white and proper and dead stone. Unless the debris is cleared, and cleared quickly, for the seedlets...of love. And the moon – a Good Friday full cold moon – aloof, maniacal orange-white eye...indifferent...meaning nothing...chill, dead...ball...of light....

I watched, hypnotized, and he moved! From where he lay on his side, just as Daphalene had piled him, with his red-felt tongue lolling at the foot of a doll with ice-blue eyes, Char stretched one black leg. Then carefully, ominously, he rolled to a sitting position and sat eyeing the toys and me, his red tongue streaming out. Like flame, that tongue – flame turned to stone, I thought, and melting and streaming. I rubbed my eyes, and I shuddered at this black dog’s odd turn.

Carefully, as I watched and could not clear this watching from my head, he circled all the toy pile. Three times. Then he walked among them, slowly, on great fur feet, the big scarlet tongue unrolling out of the caverns of the mouth and the caverns behind the mouth and flowing over all the toys until all the itch and burn had been quite lapped from them. Then with a sweep of a massive foot he crushed the jack-in-the-box until the leering face of jack lay nose-up, frightening without a home. And all the pins and the fishhooks and keen bright nails were carefully pulled from the stuffed toys and the dolls, and the sharp points

soon lay together in a little heap on the floor. And the black dog grinned, a strange grin in the moonlight, before he moved...on me...

Like a wrecking ball swung at a stubborn structure of brick and masonry stone the sound was. And the harsh noise of my falling among the toys was followed by a chortle of morning grayness. She stood there holding the big black Char clutched fondly in her arms and her baby-girl hands. The little stomach ball-slight over the band of her training pants, the sleep squint yet in her baby-girl blue eyes, she was asking Char if he had been a good doggie and had slept well all through the night.

The scream of winning was harsh and high when, the sleep squint gone, she saw that the box was broken. She was astonished at jack so strange and peeled looking outside his box and springs, and she must have known that he could not slap her now. She was concerned for the stuffed bears and cats and the dollies that I had fallen among. When I arose bleeding, I was surprised to leak two pins and a fishhook from my hands. The other sharp-pointed things from all the toys lay in a shiny small mound where I, standing or sitting or walking in a strange moon-lit trance, had watched Char so carefully place them for the little girl who loved him...and whom he must have...greatly...loved....

The Survey Trip

It was in the land of Knockjonesbrainsout in the years of the squeeze that I saw him wiring and welding. He had a metal suit that was shaped somewhat like a heart, and he was shaped like the suit. "I'm fixing myself in," he said sidewise to me as I came by rolling my colored beach ball in the loll way while the sun burned across a sky of hot-blue, and people scurried and hurried.

"So you're fixing yourself in?" I said.

"Yeh," he continued, "now is the time, and soon 'twill be riding time, and when I go I figure to ride through in steel. I'm not feudal, but still it's the age for containers."

"You look like a heart," I said then, and I tried to do it aghast, though nothing surprises me that much, certainly. But still, I thought he deserved some flutter from me. After all, when anyone goes to all that effort, and a suit to match!

"Yeh," he said resignedly.

"Well...!" I said. I twiddled my big, striped beach ball that I roll in dry and wet country. I tried to keep it on the blue. I find the blue stripe is fitting for almost any day. "Well...!?" I said.

"Would you care to go?" he said.

"Where?" I asked.

"With me," he said, "on a survey."

"I'm not doing anything," I admitted. "But I'd have to bring Roscoe."

"Roscoe?" he wondered.

I twitched an elbow in the direction of that I meant. Roscoe behaved

on a blue stripe. It even surprised Mr. Heart. "Surely," he said finally, "bring Roscoe. Do you have horses?"

"Horses!?" I asked. "Say, how old are you?"

"Wouldn't care to say," he said.

"Horses went out way back with Grandpa's beard," I told Mr. Heart, using a patience I seldom use. Somehow I liked Mr. Heart.

"Ho ho," said Mr. Heart, "and ha ha too. I know what you mean. But wait till you see what I mean." He struck then two metal hands together and made a steel clash. And he moowroonked low, like the mating call of a frog. And though it was low, it shook nine city blocks. Roscoe, for all his displacement, heaved up in the air like the start-up of a driven golf ball. "Hey! watch what you're doing," I cried out at Mr. Heart. But something whizzing took the air from what I'd said until not even I was sure whether or not I'd said it. Metal street lids whammed by like the beginning of the great day of the uncapped manholes, and the whinny the neighing steeds made sounded like horns tied down at noon.

"How do you like Gasbelly?" asked Mr. Heart.

I looked and I was overwhelmed. I couldn't say a word. I licked my lips, I flapped my tongue, I took in all the breath I could, but nothing happened. Gasbelly had me speechless all right. Mr. Heart saw that.

"Gasbelly is ready," said Mr. Heart. "And if your ride with me, you'll somehow have to match him. With horsepower."

"But how?" I asked.

"Anything for a pal," said Mr. Heart as he jerked a hacksaw loose from behind an ear and sawed a Gasbelly in half the long way. This Gasbelly proved to be full of a lot of little Gasbellies. They lined up in a long line and grew. Then they began to move. "Quick! throw your line on the one you want," shouted Mr. Heart. So I threw a piece of loose cable around a lively sorrel job, and I saw Mr. Heart had a gray. "These'll take us," said Mr. Heart, "these'll really bear us." And I said, "Yes," out of breath.

We mounted up, Mr. Heart in his metal suit, and I in my bathing suit, though we were in the dry country. "What'll we call our horses?" asked Mr. Heart.

"How about Gasbag for mine and Gassack for yours?" I suggested.

"Oh splendid," said Mr. Heart. "That way we'll never forget Gasbelly. What's with Roscoe?"

"He can roll," I said. "I'll lead him in a special harness on a halter." So we got started, and perhaps we were a strange group. "Roscoe can be the dog," I said to Mr. Heart.

"What a splendid idea!" agreed Mr. Heart. "A beach-ball dog - it's a new thing!"

"I'll take papers out on him tomorrow," I replied. "And when we pass field trials, we'll just enter the pooch."

"Splendid," said Mr. Heart, "splendid. And he might win. But on the

other hand, there's always convention, of course, and some people expect dogs on legs."

"I know," I said, "I know. But anything might happen, and has of course."

So we rolled on through the land of Knockjonesbrainsout in the years of the squeeze. The people of that vast country were whamming each others brains out, slamming each others guts, and a kick in the pants was the least you could get from a cousin or a brother. The milk of human kindness was the color of good port wine where the dead stacked, and the people loved each other, just like that. We met five Legs who said they were of the benevolent brotherhood called Kick-a-Brother-Good, and they'd surely been doing it, and now they were a little pooped, excuse them please, they had to be getting on. So they whammed us five good ones ere they passed, and we lifted our hats in admiration toward the sheer audacity of them all and quaintness of the club.

When we came to the hall of the giant Sumwoy Gitit, we were ready for refresments. So we parked everything behind the sculptured hedge-rows and skipped in by bridge, across mock-moat. And the giant Sumwoy Gitit wasn't, when you caught him with his business pants off, a giant at all! He was just a skimpy little wrinkle-up with no hair, false teeth, gumboils, dirty nails, and he had ulcers all over the insides of his food's place. When Mr. Heart bobbed in and confronted him with the metal suit, Sumwoy stared and rubbed his eyes twice and looked at a glass he'd been drinking stuff from. Then he shrieked, "Oh God, my God," and he rang a big noise out of a tiny black button on a mahogany wall. A servant came as though life were at stake, though only job was, and stood hand-rubby near and deferential-ready before little Sumwoy Gitit. "Louis!" said Gitit, for Louis was the servant's name, "for God's sake, Louis, get Deks on the accounts for charities and have him increase everything by a million and a half of the good long green. For, oh God, I have just seen the worst thing: a heart in a metal suit. Weeooh!" Louis cleared his throat, stood hand-rubby near and deferential-ready another second and tried to ooze sympathy. So the old guy had cracked at last, thought Louis, some more. Then he went to see that all the charitites were duly increased by a million and a half of the good long green.

"Please, Mr. Gitit," said Mr. Heart, "we're tired and thirsty. We've been riding Gasbag and Gassack for many a long mile, and leading Roscoe too. Do you think we could have, maybe, a tiny piece of pie? And maybe a bone, too, for Roscoe?"

Sumwoy Gitit flung his arms toward the ceiling, hit his ears, rubbed his eyes and took on the green look of fear. "A heart in a tin can, and it talks," he muttered. Then he seized his glass and cracked it a thousand

ways against a wall. When he stood then with his small shoulders heaving, padded in the rich robe before the imitation fireplace, he was just an old and little man who couldn't fling his accumulations at the Dark. For the Dark stared noncommittal from the ornate halls and many rooms, and didn't care even a little wormy fig for Mr. Sumwoy Gitit's accumulations. But the Dark had, to be sure, some ribboned flowers for Gitit, and people around a hole — very soon now; he knew that. So Sumwoy chewed his false teeth down on many fearful little thoughts while the imitation fire filled the room with a kind of nothing...

When again we were mounted up on Gasbag and Gassack, Mr. Heart said, "You know, I felt kind of sorry for Mr. Gitit. Because he didn't really. If you know what I mean."

I could but nod, "Yes," into the wind of riding as we lifted our mounts to great speed. Roscoe rolled behind in his special harness and halter. We were going to call on some figures.

We arrived at Dustt just before bedtime, late one night, and found a man known as Mr. Go-Gus-Go 8-to-5 and a dieted body known as Miss 9-to-5-No-Time-Off-For-Lunch. I let Mr. Heart do the talking, and he got right down to the interview. Pretty soon he pinned it all with a question. "Do you people really approve of Mr. Sumwoy Gitit, his wormy attitudes, business methods, and general activities?" asked Mr. Heart. "We work for him!" said she without much thinking. "Yeah," answered he without thinking at all, "he's our whole ideal!" Mr. Heart then said "OH!" in a stricken breath-choked voice of deepest concern and fainted dead away on the spot. So I dragged him out in the hall, tossed water on him for awhile, got his heels up and his head down for awhile and we left as soon as we could.

When again we were on our way, Mr. Heart didn't say a word. He just rode with all of him in the metal container. "When I see something like we just saw," I said, "I always want to take a good long swim 'way out somewhere to where its clear and miles deep and icy cold too, and never come back anymore at all unless I have to." Mr. Heart popped his head out of the metal neck-hole. But he couldn't speak at all.

We rode on and on then, across many strange miles and through several weathers. And everywhere we found people who were just Sumwoy Gitit and 8-to-5 and 9-to-5 over and over so much that Mr. Heart rode more and more finally with nothing out of his metal suit but the appendages required to ride Gassack. I rode Gasbag, noncommittal, and cared only for Roscoe, the beach-ball dog. Somehow I knew even in his hollow hide he was as good as all kinds of people, and long ago I had become resigned, had made my peace with eventualities, as well as with sun, wind and rainy weather. When we came to a piece of water, I would swim and not care; I would lie in the sun. Mr. Heart, who still hoped and still cared, cried almost all the time, riding in his metal envelope.

Up To the Edge of Heaven

Sure, we thought we had it, the big win. I won't deny that I thought that. When we got our notices of acceptance it seemed that special seals and certificates must surely have been placed and Joy was coming down to bear us home on wings. And there would be rewards, oh, there surely would be rewards....

I got my notice when I still lay all together in a nice sleep like a rock, and there were flowers around me, and a small crowd sitting, and someone up front in a choky voice talking – about ME. Well, some of the things he said about me certainly weren't true, not on either side of the book. But I will say this, he gave me, generally, the benefit of the doubt so that his remarks, in-the-large, were laudatory. And lying there listening with my rock ears and watching the proceedings with my agate eyes, what was still left of my concrete heart was waiting for the Call. I knew there were certain things that had to be totted up and the decision might take time. But they'd had three days now, very near, and I wanted that decision. I didn't want to have to come back up through dirt. I'm not a plant! And if I were going the other way – down – well, that was a possibility too stark almost to contemplate at this late and terrible date. But I'll tell you the truth, I almost half expected to go that way – down. Yes, I did! I knew how all those things were sure to be totaled up, and I'll tell you I no doubt had some BAD things against me. But I just lay there, feet and hands like stone, head like a cold lump of lead in all those flowers and faced the possibilities, more helpless than I'd ever been, yes truly, except maybe for those first few months when I was forming up. And even then what I was going to be had life, real

physical life. And now I was just an essence, whatever that could mean. And I would have traded it all back just then just to be able to scratch my nose. But nothing that all of them knew, or maybe would ever or could ever know, could make me ever again to raise that rock hand to touch that leaden nose. These bones and meat were done, the muscles and the madness finished, the warts and wants of flesh through; the blood was mostly somewhere down a drain, going for Big River by now probably, and I was braced with fluids I did not own. So I just faced it, rock-faced and cold.

And I got it! Right there when they were singing a song, I got it – my notice of acceptance! “Come on up. Be with us,” it said. “New units are forming.” – New units are forming?! Huh? – But I did not have time to waste upon that strange and puzzling note at the end. I had the big prize, surely the big prize, “Come on up” not “Get on down.” I left out through the flowers, and I didn’t move a bloom – just about when the hope song was ending. And I wondered as I left how much longer they would talk and sing at the nothing-now back there. And later they would throw dirt on it, oh yes, a lot of dirt on it.

But it was nice to be out in the sun once again. But not for long! There was a car, a strange and alien car, and it had a big hose out with, on the end, a huge funnel that breathed and sniffed and whistled at the air. I heard a voice say, “It’s the best way to get ‘em. Sure, we’ll get some insect hulls and mouse hairs and ant feelers and other things that won’t apply or qualify, but we’ll also get this, ha, essence, ha ha.” And they did. I was sucked in through the funnel, *schzooomp!* almost before I had had time to get my bearings outside the little church door.

And I guess we might say that way of taking me, together with the oddness of the car itself, was the first thing that set me back in my Joy. I don’t know what I had expected exactly, but I hadn’t expected this. I guess more or less all through my life I had sort of half way imagined I’d make the team when the time came, and I guess, when I did, I expected to go up in glory, special uniform and everything. Or at the very least I had expected to be allowed to float up there at an easy pace on my own, lounge up through snowy clouds and goldy sunshine and report to the Head Man when I got ready, almost on my own terms of familiarity and high good fellowship. After all, one of the chosen, you know. Fair fields of heaven, you know. Milk and honey – streets of gold....

When I was first in there with the ant feelers, cockroach legs, mouse hairs and all the other light things they’d sucked in along with me, including seed floats, of course I wanted to know what kind of rig I was in. So I started feeling for walls. And funny part of it was, I couldn’t feel any walls. Was I a nothing in Nothing now!? But no. While I was still reaching around in the dark and trying to get my bearings, a hard voice,

metallic and terrible, like a hammer on a tin barn, almost, ripped open the stillness. It was one of the drivers. "Got to push this rig, Mac. We've got a union card that says we can do it. So I'll sleep out the first leg, and you don't spare the whoosh. Then you wake me and I'll take 'er the second part, and if we don't get him up to Pete's on time, I'll kiss your left hip pocket from here to the next red star."

So we started. Or I guess we did. Truth is, I couldn't feel a thing. I couldn't tell we were moving. But before I had time to worry much about it, evidently we had driven through both legs, they had really pushed 'er, hadn't spared the whoosh, and without doubt we were up to Pete's on time. "And so you can just keep your hip pockets out of my face," I heard the terrible voice say, and a laugh shook what I know now to have been the outer Edges of Heaven. "The Sky Haul never misses," I heard the other one say, and I could tell they were proud. "He'll make it in time to join his outfit. And that's what counts when there's a war on."

A war on?! Good Jesus God in Heaven!

Well, I got out of this car in which the drivers, apparently, had raced the stars and had won. The way I got out was a little odd, I thought. They reversed things now and built up pressure inside, and when a little tube finally opened up, naturally I and the ant feelers and the cockroach legs and the other light litter popped out. We were directed down toward a huge basket, and I won't say it was gold. Far as I could see it was just a kind of beat-up gray wicker basket with indefinite walls, and I was the only essence there, I think, in that one basket. What happened to the ant feelers, the cockroach legs and the other light litter, I really wouldn't know. What happened to me — well!! it wasn't what you'd expect, not on the Far Fields.

My basket was loaded on a big thing that you had to think was a gray car of a train. A lot of other baskets were loaded on, and there were a lot of gray cars to the train. Then we went for what seemed to me a very short haul, although it might have been a quite long haul. I'd sort of lost my perspective on time and distance, and I don't imagine there's any use not to admit that. When the train stopped, all of us stayed in our baskets, because we didn't know what else to do. For my part I began to be more apprehensive than I'd been for a long long time, but when a firm voice bounced at us out of a big gray speaker cone of a public address system I think it stiffened us all and put a kind of do-or-try starch in our forms. "All right, you guys, out of your baskets! If you guys think you came up here to loaf, we'll soon change that idea." (Didn't come up here to loaf? Peace and rest! What gives?) But we scrambled out of our baskets. And there was starch in our forms when we got out! At least we could see each other, and strangely we were the

sizes and shapes we had been down below when we had our all-too-corporeal bodies with us. And some of us were in pretty bad shape, there's no slipping around that fact.

"Get in formation. Let's go!" The speaker-cone voice clearly was in no mood for nonsense. So we formed into a kind of ragged, barely-passable formation. Enough of us had been through it down below that it was possible now for us veterans to help jog and jostle the greenhorns into place. We straightened the lines as best we could, and we stood there wan and wondering, some of us starting to exchange a few corny, almost off-color jokes, just like old service times, and a light mist began to fall.

From the little shack just under the speaker cone he came, and he strode out across the platform that was in full view of us all. He did not glow; he did not have a halo, nor any wreath of stars about him any place that I saw. He was just a stocky shape of a man in a vague suit of khaki-brown that looked like a uniform, and the heavy thick-soled boots he wore looked to me like paratrooper jump boots. He had two vague shapes with him, flunkies, both obviously of far lesser rank, one to carry a clip board and one to stand ready to do any needed thing. Their main function, as I saw later, seemed to be to leer at us and to look in full agreement about all that the Captain said.

"Is he God?" I heard someone ask in a very breathed-out bothered way, but I didn't hear any answer.

Then he started to speak. "Welcome to the Edge of Heaven, you guys. Welcome - And that's probably the last nice thing I'll say to any of you, until you prove to me you've got something on the ball. You guys think you've got a pretty good deal, coming up here. You really think you've got it made. Well, let me tell you this. Before I'm through with you, I'll make you wish you'd never been born - unless you measure up. I'll make you sorry you ever heard of Heaven - if you goof. Ah yes, if you measure up, this can be a pretty nice service. But this is the Edge of Heaven - not Heaven. Need I tell you, there's a war on. And you men have been chosen to come up here and help fight it, not so much because you deserved Heaven - few do these days (or ever have) - but because you've proved to us you can fight on the right side. Not a one of you but what has done many bad, even despicable, things. But you, all of you without one exception, clung to the idea of finally being better. Somehow in your deepest longings you thought you would one day eventually hold that line! shape up, start the hard road back to innocence and earn Heaven. But that's just where you were both very right and very wrong. Sure, you should have been better and earned Heaven; the way you were, you should have gone to Hell! Except you had that one little trait that saved, that's just where you would have gone - Hell. And listen, because this is important. In all of you we choose for that

final enlistment in Heaven, when the time came and you had to make your choice in the really big encounters down below, you chose right, you chose the up instead of the down way. And that's all that made you eligible, finally, in our way of deciding. Although I'll have to admit, because of our system, they've got some able and quite strong men down in Hell that we have been forced to reject."

He talked on, a lot more of the same, and I won't say I was too happy about the way things were shaping up. It would be a lie if I did say that. Here I'd come all the way up the sky, thinking to rest and enjoy my rewards, and what happens? A tough-guy Captain in big boots strides out to speak mainly of a war being on and a hard fight coming up. Near the end of his oration I guess he must have noticed that I looked pretty wild. Because I guess my face has always looked wilder and more sledge-hammered than almost anyone's face when I've been hit between the eyes with a lost hope or had to give back a prize that I thought I had just fairly won.

When he was dismissing the others into the hands of the two vague flunkies for assignment to quarters and for all the other tedious dull details that have to be accomplished for new units of warriors, he motioned for me to come up on the platform. "You got a beef?" he said.

Let it be known about me, when the time comes I spout it. "Yes I do," I blurted. "Naturally I wasn't sure I'd be chosen for this sky life. But when I was, you can bet your boots I didn't expect to be put in some kind of an army for more fighting. I expected to come up here and lounge around, rest and see God. You're not God."

He laughed a little, that tight dangerous mirthless laugh that the Captains laugh when an underling has just spoken about what the Captain is not. "No," he said, and his voice I thought did seem a trifle sharp, "surely even you would not expect to see God at the Edge of Heaven." He paused and let his gaze drop to a far part of the platform where the mist swirled and eddied, and then he looked up toward where droplets milled about the speaker cone and could be imagined as making strange designs. "I've never seen Him myself," he said, his gaze jumping back to me, "but I have my orders. As indeed we all have. From here to the End-of-Time! if it takes that long to win it. Orders from Him. Through the long chain of command. — I hope to — some time — see Him. Perhaps at the end of the long fight, after we've won it. — Now will you stay? Or do you suspect they might have softer Captains, easier duties — down yonder?"

But he had touched the good part of my pride, and I suppose he had hoped to do that. "It's not a matter of the softer Captains," I retorted, "nor the easier duties. I can take what they dish out. My being here proves that! And actually, I don't think you can send me back now, even

if you want to. If I don't choose to go. And I don't!" And we both knew I had stated it straight and true to the Captain. Also we both knew, facing each other there in the blunt encounter, amid the strange designs of the whirling mist, that it was the best of good starts for the long fight in from the Edge of the Heaven.

Control

When I first heard about him and what he was trying to do I thought he must be one of the world's chief NUTS. But the more I think about it, and the more these Terrible Events keep happening the while Old Earth shudders with "too much" and loads out bloated, the more I'm not so sure — not so sure at all! — When I went down to see him that leaf-fall chill and smog-blow autumn day, the emblem over his shop was a proddy-rammer, chain-linked in a net; the statue in his factory yard, out near the sundial, was a proddy-rammer also, but unchained. This one was naked and free except for tight-fitting, but bulky, sculptured drawers enclosing a big part of the lower torso, including the rammer. This all confused me not very much, because I knew that a proddy-rammer was a fanciful bit of mechanical moving nonsense that had been dreamed up about half a century ago by a senior-citizen (comedian) factory owner with a small machine shop and a screw loose — surely! He, near the absolute sun-sink of his career, manufactured a few dozen of them, entirely at his own no-profit expense, programmed them for antic, unsolemn sex, turned them loose and they were a — LAUGH! Because they were essentially tall-thighed legs that moved a long, almost-no-shouldered, thin-headed body relentlessly over the countryside, they reminded some of kangaroos. And swung between the tall-thighed legs was a black, solid, long, snub-nosed cylinder, of some considerable bulk, that twirled and jerked and vibrated constantly, and very often, while twiddling, took a poke at the ground, the sides of buildings and trees. But sometimes it seemed just to be trying to have a sexual go with the hollow air, while the rest of this strange-and-comic

contraption sat hunched on its metal haunches and, looking very ridiculous indeed, kept that prodding rammer elevated at about a forty-five or a fifty, revolving, swiveling, vibrating and pumping away at the empty moveless void, nonstop. It was a JOKE! I guess. Although I can see it as comment, a manifestation of an excellent sunset opinion of EVERYTHING.

But this current man, this sad and serious soul-search blue-eyed evangel man, why had he chosen such an obvious insignia from the past, such a totem, such a ridicule for his factory's out-front to the world, his good morning and his good afternoon to the public's gaze? The ways of nuts are strange; the ways of geniuses are even stranger, I suppose.

The world and his times had hacked him to the bone, to every bone he owned – apparently. His days were sad; his nights were even sadder, I had heard. Somewhere after sixty he was in age, and his life had quite turned sour – lone child gone to found a faraway home of her own and not remembering Daddy very much or very often, and wife not remembering him at all in her yen for younger males who still could vibrate those matted springs with her.

So he turned himself inward, searched for a cause, one worthy of his pent-up wrath and frustrations, and found it. And thus he made the "Last-Chance Pants," threw his research laboratories, his accumulated wealth (certainly substantial) and his whole big factory's know-how and material resources upon them. In other words, fastening like an evangel upon mission he moved all his mental and material strengths upon this program of salvation for a world backed into a corner and battling stoutly, but not stoutly enough. He'd help it to battle harder and win the fight. YES! He had no doubt that his solution was foolproof. And entirely feasible. Such is the way of dedicated nuts. And geniuses? AH YES!

It was in October that I went down to Phil Sandbrowsky's place, chill and blowing fall, leaf-drop and frost-feel autumn times stepping fast toward the closure of a year, but harvest too and stuffed-bin times across the air – in fact, a feel of bloat-full – somehow. But then, I've always liked October and leaf-drop times. I've always liked the scudding clouds and walking in cold mist too, and midnight to three A.M. are my favorites hours of all. I'm built for closures and the last-ditch stand, could be. Winning is not my style, but losing is not my style either. Battling it to a dying-fighter finish, belt in last-hitch hole, starving teeth shedding dust from all that most terrible thirst, and defiance in all that last-ditch stance; lips curled back, cursing and crying and determined to never give in, that's me! But somehow sold on the notion that I can't win, either. Just contesting it to a cold-dog draw. And a wife who says,

"Whatever it is, you'd certainly be sure somehow always to make it more difficult." (Those kinds of wives fill graves, eventually and in due time, of course. It's a thousand wonders they don't make it sooner more often, with that final success of really fixing those no-win husbands, and for good, with a murder rap.) And children I have who do not respect me at all, old generation gorge incarnate, and the final accolade to wear like a sad, cold clown, "You're so DUMB! DADDY!"

But I hold down a job, and I battle that job, and I support my nag-nag wife and my several (thirteen) disrespectful children who do not honor me at all. If that Bible quote is true (about honoring parents to earn a long life) my children must surely have been dead since so long ago it's not even funny, and these are only ghosts I feed and feel the verbal stings of. But then, maybe for me I have just the family I deserve. I'm a no-win battler, remember, and those kinds sometimes expect to come in every day dead on their battle-battered shields, to be resurrected in indifference and chaos overnight and seize those shields to lurch back out there, in the early-morning's shining, for the next day's hopeless. EACH DAY I DIE! — if you follow me. But I survive too, out of some elemental toughness and enough stubbornness for a thousand coal-mine mules.

ANYWAY — I'm a fairly successful reporter for a really successful publication, and they, the high-dog bosses, sent me down to Phil Sandbrowsky's place. I guess the people in charge in the office thought I deserved the assignment; I'm not just quite clear on why they should think that, but I suppose I could set my brains to spinning and figure out some reasons, other than the fact that I have all those thirteen children, all disrespectful and cluttering the earth's environment. Because they're DUMB down at the office and don't appreciate me, I'll settle for that reason as to why I still go on common field assignments — and think no more about it. You can probably guess by now that though I'm hapless, essentially, in outlook, in my self-appraisal I still have a diamonds-and-gold opinion of my potential. Compared with other people, usually, I'm the possible GREATEST! and some time, by God, still aim to prove it by battling some really worthwhile Dragon to a cold-dog draw. Though I'm mired in mud right now, deep deep ooze-muck.

But let's get on down to Sandbrowsky's place, Phil Sandbrowsky's. Compared with a man who is dedicated to saving the world through "Last-Chance Pants," of what worth possible is a little family-harassed no-win second-rate reporter — ME (though still with boastful dreams)? No worth, none, of course. But Sandbrowsky — the man who will save the world from all its ills of overpopulation, overpollution, over-everything — there IS a man!

He sat behind a small entirely-black steel desk in the corner of a really, in size, substantial office space. But that office was essentially

bare! The overall impression, I have to say, was of Sahara-Desert barrenness. Except for his desk and two chairs, only one piece of office furniture was visible, a small file case. One stingy-wattage light, with a shade of small ships sailing round and round in what looked to be almost the exact center of the ceiling, lit the room. The tall thin vase off to one side on his almost-bare desk contained a solitary, and rather nondescript, black-red artificial rose, a long time there, apparently, and dusty. And there was, approximately six inches tall, on the desk, this small statue of a very-vigorous-stanced proddy-rammer in bulky sculptured drawers, directly in front of Phil Sandbrowsky.

Mr. Sandbrowsky sat alone, no secretary whatever anywhere, just a smallish-appearing, sober-featured, sixtyish man behind his smallish black desk, and as for mood, he seemed in no particular mood at all today. The overall impression pleased me. Just say, for better or for worse, I was in my element in this rather spacious barrenness, facing this rather small-built man who seemed, I thought, perhaps of some real substance when it came to will and purpose toward the last-ditch stand. "Mr. Sandbrowsky!" I said and I announced my own name the while I was flashing him my reporter's "credentials of the press." Of course he was expecting someone from our office to interview him, was waiting, you might say, somewhat like a small, brown and altogether capable and substantial spider in its corner web.

"Welcome to Salvation," boomed Mr. Sandbrowsky, his deep, resonant, strident voice sounding somehow out of style with his visible scrawniness and the extreme seriousness of his gaze. Yes, just sitting there showing his head, neck and shoulders, he revealed he was not a health champion this year, and I could bet he had never run that mile or lifted that weight, not in his whole long life. But when he arose to come around his desk to shake my hand, my suspicions about his physical shortcomings were dashed somewhat. He was scrawny above, all right. But below! The thighs — the out-of-proportion length and the sturdiness of them! YES! I have to say it, he was almost the living image of that statue by the sundial, that emblem over the front door to his administration building and that little guy on his desk. He was a living flesh-and-blood proddy-rammer. Almost. But the blue in his eyes was true steel, the set of his jaw was granite and the overall mien was of the evangel.

He came on around the corner of his desk, talking all the way: "Last chance, truly last chance, and I am the agent of salvation. Man in his lusts, his accidents, his not-thinking, his not-caring, his selfishness, his me-firstness, his I-don't-careness, his you-only-live onceness — oh, man in his lusty lusty wrongheadednesses must see my way is the last left hope. Have a chair, Mr. — ?" And he cocked his face to an angle in that odd way I learned that he had, waiting for my name again. I gave it a

second time, tipped by all this that here was a man who, possibly, really listened closely only to himself. "Man IS a mess, Mister - , yes!" he intoned, shaking sadly his head.

"But my 'Last Chance Pants' - these are the salvation, the last left hope of Earth - we may as well face it. I'm working on a government contract, with cost-plus understood. So you know I'm not flying blind. The public, generally, doesn't know it yet, but we're committed. - Well, it had to come to this, I suppose." He let out a small sigh. "The general public, man-general as you might say, just won't do it on its own. Everyone thinks sacrifice and care are for everyone but him. Let George do it! It's always been that way. Man's nature, you know. And castration for the men and any kind of sterilization for the women have always seemed abhorrent to most people. Something in the psyches of men and women demand these things be left intact. For possible future use! But Old Earth can only take so much." He let out another sigh, angled his head and face, and I suspected by now that these were just his ways of pausing before starting another gush of his rambling pronouncements. So I cut in. Fast.

"Mr. Sandbrowsky, would it be possible to be specific about these 'Last-Chance Pants,' what they'll do, how they'll do it? Or is this mostly classified information, which the government stipulates that you keep under the covers, as it were, ha ha? Of course, this is an interview, and whatever you say, I'll feel free to turn in to my sheet."

"A year ago, Mr. - , uh, why I would have been bound to tell you only the sketchiest of details. But now it's close enough that the public must begin to know. I can tell you Mister, within the year, like it or not, they'll be going into these drawers. It's got to be that way. My God, but we're popping at the seams as it is, and people just won't stop on their own. They just won't. They could have the perfect pill and the perfect foam and the perfect grease and the perfect outside wrap or inside block and they'd still break out for that elemental urge. Or maybe they'd have accidents. Accidentally on purpose, as we used to as kids, ha ha, say. But either way, Old Earth just can't take it anymore. We're REALLY popping out the stitching, man." He sighed. Then, strangely, a little gleam of personal feeling showed through a small break somewhere in what I had believed was, by now, control quite granite. "I can hardly wait to get HER into one of those pants," he mused, "although, actually, she's probably quite past it, so far as any danger to Old Earth's increase is concerned. But we'll suit her up anyway! For safety, safekeeping and the good of the cause. Ha ha. 'Inventor's wife sets the pace! - spurns the lace!' How'll that sound?"

"But Mr. Sandbrowsky, for my article on you and the 'Last-Chance Pants' I'll need specifics on just how these pants'll work. Cold facts, scientific info, real data. Could you tell - ?"

"Oh, they'll work, all right. Some of the best engineers and scientists of the day have been in on those drawers. It's been expensive, terribly expensive, let me tell you, but I decided right at the very first to stint no stint, skimp no skimp, pinch no billion dollars, considering the stakes at stake! There was but one Saviour, as we all know, God's son, Jesus Christ. But His saving of the world was mainly for the Afterlife. And now my saving must be for This Present Life. Oh, I don't mean I'll ever rank with Him, or anything like that. No, no. But I think I may very well go down as the second greatest man in the world's history. It will be, as I think you have to admit, the second most significant happening in the human story — the saving of our world for This Present Life. — It does seem that for every great crisis in world history, fortunately there has been the man —"

"But Mr. Sandbrowsky! how, HOW? Could you tell —?"

"How? HOW!? Just by getting into those restraints, man! that's how. Man, if you can do anything in my 'Last-Chance Pants,' if you can get away with anything, I'll personally give you a farm in Texas, with a Kentucky Bluegrass running horse to walk over it, tax-free! and I'll contract to feed your cats each and every morning, including Sundays, and I'll mow your yard grass extra, and I'll water your dogs, all for no-pay. I'm that sure, man. I don't miss. You understand? I've had the best and the most expensive scientists and engineers who exist today, and that means who ever lived, in on those pants. And if all those trained brains have missed, Mister, you'll have to show me! Man, they'll work. They'll close things down skintight, just as tight as we want it, and that'll be like a vise. You can't yell around about civil rights and personal freedoms and higher pay for teachers and itinerant farm workers when something as big as this is at stake. Mister, we're gonna put people into those lock-tights, including my own wife, for the good of the world, like it or not. It's a matter of life or not, plain and simple survival for Old Earth. How do you like that?" Of course it was time for a sigh and a new face angle.

"I don't know whether I like it or not until you tell me more about how they'll work," I fished.

"Mister, they'll work just fine. I didn't have the best minds of science and engineering in on those drawers for nothing. — Ever after the age of puberty, when the danger strikes, it'll be total regulation for both sexes. All over the world, EACH and EVERY breed-capable male and female of the species must register at the age of puberty. And I mean TOTAL world registration! no exceptions. And I mean TOTAL world regulation! no exceptions, on completely through the menopause for the women and on completely through the final, completely last erection for the men. They'll be measured for those pants, and the sensors built into those drawers will make their responses to receptors on the big government regulator boards all over the world, in the government sex control

offices EVERYWHERE. — Mission Control down in Houston in the Old Days, hmmmph! and the moon shots, ha! We haven't seen anything yet, man. But we DID learn from those shots. YES! How to keep control of a man's pulse from 240,000 miles out — on the moon! for one thing. Compared with that, this doing it on Earth seems like small peas, short corn, huh? No? Hah!

"Just incidentally, it'll create a lot of jobs for the Golden Years people who won't have to wear the pants, especially the ladies (much easier to certify in this case), just managing those boards. I can see them now! retirees all over the world coming back to useful, necessary employment and enjoying it immensely. For those boards'll have to be monitored around the clock, of course, every day of every year. And I mean every second of every minute of every hour of every day of every year! By people we can trust. We're playing with TNT, man, no question about that. But any time an erotic urge develops in any human breed-capable male or female, anywhere in the world, my pants will catch the build-up and that emotion will manifest itself on a control board in a government office. When they're out for showers, say, or just to change underwear, it'll show on the chart. And we'll darned well make certain, in any one population pod, that only one sex at a time goes for showers or a change. And they'd well better be back in those drawers in the time allotted or it'll be curtains. What I mean is, an Investigative Spotter, usually a Golden Years sex-scout, will hightail it over on a sex-scoot to see why the slow drawers. And that's just the way it'll show on the individual's chart — SLOW DRAWERS — in flashing orange and the pinpoint location of the transgression. Extenuating circumstances — then all all right. Trying to slip in some hanky-punk — oh, then punishment certain and severe.

"Oh, have no doubt, Mister, under my system any breed-capable human beings slow-drawerred or blanked out on the Big Screens without permission, which means they are without my pants without permission, will be severely dealt with, and I mean SEVERELY! Even unto death, if it can be proved that any of the offenders have done breed-possible sex without a government go-ahead. And slipping anything over on my pants will be JUST impossible. And I mean totally NOT possible." His sigh was truly long and deep this time, a little bit self-conscious sounding, I thought; but I had to know as he face-angled at me that here was a solid man, and one intensely proud of what he had done.

Sure, I had heard the rumors about Sandbrowsky's "Last-Chance Pants," and I knew ahead of time something of what they were designed to accomplish. But with his last speech the true enormity of this thing was beginning to break in home to me. I felt almost as though I were going to be ill. "Why, this is the most monstrous invasion of human

privacy ever dreamed up by mortal man, any time, any place," I blurted. "This HAS to be the LAST word in government snooping and controls."

"But necessary," he immediately retorted. "Entirely necessary. We're exploding at the joins, as I may have already said, and they just WON'T stop on their own. And these much much too many people are violating Old Earth in every possible way, polluting her, ransacking totally her all! dragging her down. We're going to the seat of the problem, ha ha, and, believe me, there's benefits you haven't even thought of from this. It'll eliminate the terrible crime of rape, for one thing. And it'll certainly eliminate all this idea of rested sex-happy wives and girl friends forcing their energy-depleted menfolk into a sex action almost as soon as these worthies hit the front door — when these breadwinners are 'way too tired from a hard day at the office, say, dictating to their typists, or elsewhere. Venereal diseases should all but disappear. And just think how great this control'll be for factories and schools! We have to know there's things going on between the two main sexes at these places to interfere with the primary aims. Which are: in factories, production; in schools, education. But most of all, of course, we'll have that controlled population, so that Old Earth may continue to live!" He expelled his breath gently, peacefully, sounding like a warm, full and satisfied little dog on his favorite rug by a good fire. And he turned to me another face angle, smiling just a little.

"I don't believe it!" I cried, becoming more aghast all the time just contemplating the hideous enormity of it. "They'll break out. They'll figure ways to beat the pants. You can't block such an elemental urge."

"We'll block it, YES! The world governments have already bought MY idea. Of course there were alternative ideas. Many of them — selective sterilization, massive fines for having children, even mass abortion and infant mercy killings, not to mention covert introduction of plagues and controlled World Wars. But each of these plans had a serious flaw or two. With none could we be sure. And it was high-noon time for Old Earth, man, time-to-be-sure time. So after a lot of behind-the-scenes moves, extensive undercover testing and conferences galore, my no-fail plan was adopted by the powers that be. And now it's just a matter of legislating the laws, setting up the control boards in the government offices all over the world, training the enforcement and investigative cadres we'll need and getting the pants necessary to — uh, cover the situation, ha ha. You'll probably think it interesting that our enforcement and investigative forces, generally, will be comprised of old ladies far past the age of being of any pregnant weight in Old Earth's increase. YES! I can think of NO better force on Earth, NONE! than old ladies past it, to keep the breed-capable people toeing the mark. And those Old Ones will enjoy their work so much, tearing out on their sex-scoots (wheels, sex-racers) we'll provide, to snoop on a lapsed pant, we prob-

ably won't have to pay union scale. Or, with the right promotional appeal, maybe these Golden Years dames, already secure with their government longevity funding, will volunteer their services gratis. 'Golden Years ladies keep the lid on sex!' How does that hammerlock your mind? Grabs the brain, doesn't it? But of course, these are all just details, details, and, as anyone knows, it'll all take ironing-out time. All great social and industrial advances have. But I'll bet you, inside of five years you won't be able to have reproductive sex anywhere without government permission, not even if your life depends on it. And you won't be able to have ANY kind of sex, from self-abuse on down, or up, without the government knowing about it through my 'Last-Chance Pants.' — It'll be ultimate control for the survival of man!"

"I DON'T BELIEVE IT!" I shouted. "I WON'T BELIEVE IT!"

"You're probably the type of person who doesn't really believe in the credibility of the Resurrection of Christ or His Second Coming either," he shot back, irritated just a little, I could tell. And suddenly, without my knowing I was going to do it, I jumped up and ran from him, ran and ran.

On the Sunniest Day of Spring

The little girls were restless where they had gathered, and they moved out, knowing somehow where they must go. They left the known streets of Mama, and they never looked back, though they wished to, and some of them cried. They walked swiftly over the nail pastures, through the orchard with the cutting edge leaves and across gardens of the razor blade flowers. They came with smudge on their white dresses and the hankies they held in their pinkish just-past-little-girl hands were reddish black from jelly stolen and red-red from the wounds they had got on the way to the sullen cold town.

In the very center of town he sat straight up like a black rock at sitting sentinel, with a pointed beard wedged down like a big simple arrow of stone from some sculptor. The children went round and round him at a little-girl-march-at-games, and they started to be so happy they began to sing. But still, though they were happy that there seemed not to be, they looked for signs of life, and therefore the threat, in the sullen cold rock. And finally, convinced it was only a straight-up stone – there were no openings for surprises and danger it seemed, and all was what it seemed, two hard lines for a body and a beard – one little girl boldly rapped at an edge of him with the tips of her jelly-stained hands.

"Garrumph!" he immediately said, and his arrow of a beard flipped up quickly to look like the very sharp visor of a cap. And his mask was under that. His arms and shoulders swung off at little angles, sectioned cleanly out of the beard, and at all this the little girls jumped and screamed. Then they giggled.

"Did you come by the way of the Wheelgos, on that big white road?" he asked, starting right off at conversation, speaking through the mask, gritty-voiced like an ancient record with an old needle playing, while the stone arrow vibrated and pointed at all of the girls. But it pointed more directly at the one who had stroked him. This little girl looked misted in, puzzled and sick. Then she brightened and said in her girlish treble, "Sure, I know." And she gestured at a grayish blob of road mud on her white dress. "We came a short way that way. And one of them Wheelgos things blooped past me on what they call a soft shoulder, in a gasjoy." Then she laughed that half-embarrassed self-conscious little laugh girls laugh after a bright saying. "Why?"

"You're so bloody and stained," he said. "I thought maybe you'd come all the way by way of the Wheelgos Road."

"Nah," she replied in her high voice, "only a short way that way. We came across pasture nails, by the trees with whirling blade edges, and through the razor blade flowers mostly. You can see we went to a lot of trouble to get here. At first we just wanted to spot clean our dresses, because of jams and jellies. But now it's blood, too. Our mommies'll really be mad!"

"Heh heh heh," laughed the stony old man with N-T T chiseled on his chest. "You little girls don't gotta worry none a-tall." Then he clenched his stony knuckles together in a little manner of glee, and for a moment he looked like Black Santa. But when he reached beneath where he was sitting and brought out the long black boxes, the smile left to make room for cunning grins. "Here 'tis, girlies. What you need wherever you go from now on. And your mommies can't ever be mad again 'cause you've spoiled your little white gowns." Then he opened the somber boxes to the shining dark, and the little girls gasped at the glistening jet-black dresses. They clasped their tiny hands and knew the black garments were just what they wanted. And they started peeling their soiled white dresses off over their curly heads. They stood around in their young-girl slips and panties; they squealed and laughed, not yet knowing they should pretend embarrassment with the outer white shell off before this uncompromising statue in the strange town.

He passed out the black dresses, a size for each, for he was as a clock measuring years in a voice like two gritty stones grinding. He was New-Trying Times, mayor in the town of Awareness and Pain, and he had known they would come. "Now," he said, "you little girlies don't have to worry none a-tall. You can romp in the grass, you can roll in the mud, you can even wrestle with them boy chums and your mommies'll never know again. Heh heh."

They looked concerned for a moment, and then they all said at once, "We don't want to fool our mommies. We love our mommies. It's just that they would have whipped us, about those stains. And then the

blood too where we cut ourselves in the nail pastures and the razor blade gardens, not to mention the orchard of the whirling blade wild-apple trees."

The old sculptured man with N-T T chiseled on his chest laughed heh heh and said, "If I's you girlies I'd just go back by the way of the Wheelgos Road. Why waste time in them pastures and woods and gardens with them minor cutters and nails? Heh heh. Go with the gasjoys." Then he folded his knuckles together into his wrists, and the elbows telescoped while the shoulders wedged down, and everything that had been sticking out went smoothly into the beard that had clacked closed over the mask that had talked. The interview was over though the little maids could hardly be expected to know that. They stood around awhile, one-leg stance, two-legs-spread pose, jump-up-and-down, giggle-and-laugh, and finally one said, "Well, that was cert'nly a funny one." Then they all disappeared down a hill, running smoothly in their black clothing, in search of a Wheelgos Road.

On the way to a Road, about half way across a nail pasture, they saw them nasty things, them boys. One said she wanted to puke they made her so ill, and another said she couldn't stann'nd them, and still another said she didn't know why they had to be so aw-ful. But a plain-faced bright-eyed little maid with hair like straight straw squeaked, "I don't know, maybe they're not so bad. I like to tease 'em." So they all veered not an inch to miss them awful things, them boys.

When the two groups met, the boys mostly turned deep dull red, drew gulpy breaths, and looked at their sneaker toes. The girls all giggled knowing how they had them awful things, them boys, in an embarrassment corner. "Cats got their tongues," they yelled, "scratchin' their teeth out, yah." But the boys rallied and made little fighting passes at the girls after a while, and they all chased and giggled for a time. Then a tiny maid more perceptive than all the rest observed, "They've each an' ev'ry one got on white pants and shirt. And not a spot! Well, I'll be -"

"Sure," gasped a red-faced puffing pimple boy, "our mommies made us come out like this. For services. Said we mustn't get 'em dirty. But we'll show them. If we can just get across this pasture, there's a mud hole by a big pit. We'll show them. And then we're going back to get our Rocket suits. So we can play Jets-Out-and-Searching. Fellows we like 'd laugh, see us rigged like this."

"I don't see why you have to go over to a mud hole by a pit," squeaked the little girl with hair like straight straw. "Stay with us. Maybe it'll rain. Hee hee huk. And what's so great about your little kiddie game, Jets-Out-and-Searching, pray tell?"

"Naw," the boys all said, fire-faced and short of breath, "we mustn't stay." When they left, it was like a tinged white cloud that bounced eas-

ily across the glare-pasture where the sun glinted on long nails stuck up like silvered grass. "We'll meet you in maybe a thousand years," a tall boy shouted, and saluted, from a hill just before the white cloud fell down the other side. "If we can't help it." And his jesty words speaking for all of the lads came across all that danger, mixed with the blood raining down from their feet as they topped quickly the last rise to the Mid-valley and the mud hole by the pit. They entered into the mud bath and soon were lounging about in the gay-colored ooze, quite covered with oil-slick and filth, except for their pimply-raw faces. Then each lad covered his face with a pack and let that dry in the sun. When they pulled the mud away, they felt that parts of their faces, the flaky pieces of dried skin, were coming with the mud to leave their faces looking slick and new. And true, their visages seemed fresher with the shininess of awareness traced there and that inescapable heritage of oncoming urgencies crowding for room.

They broke from the mud then, like springtime plants up from thawing ground. And they shouted and screamed where they milled, all puffed with some new urge — and still a little confused. But, led by a tall boy, they raced to the Lower-valley after a while where a gay road much cluttered with Wheelgos and bones circled through. And they set their course, without quite knowing why they did this, to intercept a black prancing cloud that came giggling, but with that certain grimness, along.

Please Help! Save Our Bugs and Pile Our Birds

"Training talk time! Training talk time! TRAINING TALK TIME!" (I said it like bells ringing, school bells.) "Human Kindness to Small Things and ALL." They planted themselves bleach-faced and cold before me (or was that shaking terror?) and I said, "No! NOW! You will be at attention-alert in stance, at all times in a lecture, but facewise your eyes will show only avid interest, and when I say something that is funny, which I may (though not often do I do it), you shall smile. And do not be scared or under-pressure uptight at all, Little Brother, Little Sister, in my lectures. Just give me your full attention. Unstintingly. Completely. Undividedly. Willingly. Without reservation. Entirely mesmerized by a Beacon of Light before you, I, for the time that I talk. That is all! Do not equivocate."

(As you should know, I am the staunch left-parent of little children — their mother long gone in a disagreement, total disagreement with me — trying to teach them true, trying to get them ready for a world, for bumps, for the wild things loose in the stars of our times.)

"He was in the bathtub. A common little crawler, a roach, I would say, about one-third size. How he fell, I do not know. Did his pads slip? How do these things happen, all tragedy? Perhaps he was going on a trip, across on the rim of the bathtub. Perhaps a visit to a little friend, or maybe fleeing his mama, who had demanded a chore. Who knows? That was not my concern. None of my care, where he was going, why he was making the trip, what he planned to do when he got there. The manner of the fall was none of my care neither.

"TO GET HIM OUT! was my concern.

"About midnight I saw the situation. I watched him for a while. I won't deny I watched him battle for his salvation, as I contemplated all the while and savored to the full the hopelessness of his posture and the porcelain terror that he must feel. Think bug-size for a moment, Little Brother, Little Sister, if you can. Think about one-third-size-roach-size and be in our bathtub trying to top those walls! How would you like it? My small sin, watching him and savoring his terror – that I admit – for which, were I sure there was a God who cares, I'd be on my knees night and day. For that and other sins. Praying great gobs of prayers out-loud. But, you know, I keep them like a twine ball and wind them on. Each sin I sin makes a little bigger that ball. And some time, being sure, I'll unwind the ball in a great praying marathon. I think it will be easy to unwind the ball, in a great praying marathon, when I'm sure. But not being sure, I cannot unwind even the smallest string of the ball. Except in hypocrisy. And I won't do that! Though the ball get tall as a mountain in the West, I won't do that! I swear."

I hung my head and I saw that I was off-track from the bug. And going. Through glimmery eyes I saw too that Little Sister showed interest. Her gaze was bright; she had stopped trembling. "May I see that ball?! NOW!?" she cried. "Where do you keep it? Under the bed!? Is it big!?" She was dancing now, starting to clap her hands. She was half-past three.

My mind collapsed around me for a little bit of time. I knew that it might get bad if I did not rally and hold. With every bit of myself I told myself to come back. Come back and be with the children, talk about bugs; do not talk about sin. Do not think about sin. Do not THINK about a ball that gets bigger with every breath that one draws, with every second one spends not sure, not sure and rolling that ball in the cold...in the cold. "Little Sister," I said, "there is no ball to see. It is a mind-ball. You know, like you can shut your eyes and see your beautiful dolly, though she is not here, though she is out somewhere in the cold garbage-pit world of the discards, where we had to fling her and leave her that day, when you wouldn't behave...not to punish her, but to punish YOU. Well, you can shut your eyes and see your beautiful dolly as you remember her when she was here, fresh and bright and a neat part of our world, And since she is not here so that you can touch her and love her now, that has to be a mind-dolly. Right? Right!?" Little Sister, her eyes just starting to float and her face not yet broken to lip-tremble, nodded a terse agreement.

"Or imagine your dolly with her beautiful clothes all torn and big garbage stray police dogs standing over her, trying to tear her and eat her, but seeing she is not flesh, but only plastic and gray cottony fluff stuffing her out, they become angry and paw and tooth her to bits and then start to fight each other, out of their general meanness and hatred

for many things, until suddenly it is all just a flurry-blurry of flying pieces of dolly and garbage-pit bits and big garbage stray police dogs – fighting and fighting. Well, that's a mind-dolly, too, Little Sister!"

Little Sister was float-eyed and little-girl-weak about her dolly, I could not help noticing, but she would have to overcome such things and stand to the game. That was part of the point. And besides, I was off and running in a mind just able to hold. "The ball IS real, though in my mind, Little Brother, Little Sister. Sometimes, in a very bad scary dream, it chases me, and we're all downhill – I, ball, and world. And in those times it's snow out all around, just like today, except the snow is warmer in the dream-storm, warmer and more slushy-terrible, and there is a horrible calm in the air of this world that I inhabit alone. The ball starts packing and picking the snow up, until at last it is a ball of such vast and tall circling that it is packing and picking the snow up, denuding the ground, far as I can see on either side and to back. And I keep running, keep running, keep running, I and the ball in the warm wet miserable snow, running..."

"Hell with this God-damned made-up snowball of yours! What happened to the bug?" Little Brother said, and perhaps saved it all as well as the situation (although certainly, YES! I should have soaped his mouth right out for the rough talk and flayed him to raw all over for the disrespect), Little Brother, who was somewhere after four, Little Brother, who could lock it all down tight, calm and hard and miserable and be able to stick to a point in a hate-storm, or push it all to the wall in a holding operation of great sullenness and pout, Little Brother.

"The bug – the bug? Ah yes, the bug of my salvation!" And I came back from a long way out and a long way in with my sins. And the ball rolled away in my mind through a great stretch of new clean tight country snow, and the old wet trashy melty soot-flawed city snow fell away hunk and chunk and blonky-blunk-blunk until, you know, that ball was just as big as it had originally been. And there I was right where I was, with two little scared-faced children tight and taut in my "schoolroom," ready to finish them a lecture about "Human Kindness to Small Things and ALL."

"Yes, the rescue operation, as I've hinted, to the bug did not go well. It was about midnight, as I've said, and I went into our bathroom to polish the pearls, heh, heh... (Yes, you may smile – that's a funny – and a smile is permissible under the articles of our agreement at the head of the lecture, of course.) Polish the pearls, ha. As you know, I have no pearls now regular, except dental-made, because the real and the good ones came out in my rough use and service in the Great War long ago. They lie scattered now in places as diverse as the dental clinics of America, the snows of the winter plains of France and the terrible rivers in Germany with all those highly-contestable bridges. (They fought when

we crossed over into Mother Germany, The Fatherland! Don't you ever think that they did not, in their own ways some of the finest soldiers in the world, fighting for home.) And the last great charge for me was in the snow in a tight little valley in Germany, with the rims up all around. And you know, as it chanced, I was the last man alive in that tight-wall little valley. The battle passed on and they found me bleeding and hurt, down in the snow that was not quite as cold as today's and not quite as warm as the snows I dream of - bleeding and laughing. Since then I have tried to be very kind, most kind, to things that are hurt, or dead, or about to be hurt or dead, as nearly as I can tell."

"God damn it, the bug!" Little Brother said (and surely for that he did need a good mouth soap-out and a flaying); but it possibly was very well that I had him there as a rope to lead me back across the tall white ice mountains and the deep gloomy snow crevasses of the mind that day, because I certainly wasn't doing it very well myself. Maybe it was the snow that had me wandering out there, the snow and memories and the sin-ball rolling the mind. Sometimes, I'll tell you here and now, it's all I can do to keep it all tied up at the top. But I aim to, and walk it all into the hate-filled dagger-toothed world as far as I can possibly do it. Anything else would bring disgrace to the children and me, I mean, if it starts to come loose at the top and I give up and SCREAM and THEY come and get me. So the raveling edges we'll just keep working to sew while we walk stark and cold into the drumfire of our death direction. But and anyway...

Iceberg calm and icy-field grim I held and came back to the children. "TRAINING TALK time! 'Human Kindness to Small Things and ALL.' It was about midnight. I did my best to save him. Although I will confess I watched him for a while and 'lived' his struggle as he tried with all his might to scale the icy sides of our bathtub. When I thought he was far spent in his strength (I always believe in a good hard to-the-very-limits try by the victim before 'God' steps in to solve it), I bent down calmly to whoosh him up the side and over the rim with my hand. But you know what? He panicked! I guess he was not ready for a 'God' so big with help. After he fell he ran and disappeared, down the dark depths of the drain hole. And since a solid good drip was going from the fouled faucet in our bathtub, I knew there was no road back for the bug. Final curtains for the roach, and he not yet half-grown! He was gone! Flushed! Forever! Big River would soon have him! And I was so sorry that I had not left him to his panic struggles in the terror-white. So much more preferable, I thought, the hopeless struggle in the terror-white as compared to final banishment to the finish-dark. If I had not 'helped' with my blundering 'help,' maybe a cat would have come there soon. Yes! Either our Tophie or old Freech could have done it, hopped in and given the bug a lift out in the fur. Beautiful! But I spoiled it all

with 'help.' But I TRIED to be kind. My heart was in a right place, and I'm SURE that is a main thing. So just because this try fouled up, we are not going to think that we should stop trying. Are we, children? OH NO! We are just going to redouble our efforts to try better, knowing it was a right-heart thing that we did, though really it all turned out a failed gesture this time and a small world-guest is lost. UNDERSTAND!? Little Brother, Little Sister....

"All this crap about a god-damned lousy bug's ass," Little Brother started up, but I ignored him and cut him to continue: "And now I go when the snow ends to pile birds. That is one of the finest things that I do, in all seasons. Quietly I do it, and no one knows. But I know. The birds that are down and dead and perhaps maggoty and half-eaten - all defiled and feather-fouled - when I run across them, which I'm always randomly doing, I place in the nearest respectable place. On a pile of leaves or bright hay by the roadside, on a grassy little knoll somewhere along the street, some under-the-circumstances maximum-pleasant place where they will not be stepped on or tire-rolled or otherwise belittled while they sit a last time in some approximation of surroundings at least half-compatible with their former honor status as air people; since now they have not, because of nothing they could help or in any way change, the power of breath to wing them across their death... And dogs I have pulled from the road, tire-screaming, soppy with tread marks...."

But I knew I must not go on. I could feel myself sliding down, the top starting to come loose in the head now, and I knew the children were listless. "GO PLAY," I yelled. "Play with the toys of your choice now. But think of the lecture, too. Learn to be kind. Also learn to be respectful of nature's superior mechanisms, such as birds. Some dogs and cats, too. And when the snow melts, as it will, have faith! Have faith! Perhaps you'll both want to come with me on my first after-storm walk and bird pile...."

The Time Saviour

He came down from an out street, his furred face a mask floating like a boulder tumbling through the early-evening fog. The big canvas sack he shouldered was bottom-lumped and full of a ticking sound I noticed as his body parted the murk. Like a very short ship with a blunt prow, I thought, this character sails wet dusk, with a masthead. This autumn evening. While the Salvation Army plays. As his trancelike face passed swiftly, up and down, and rolling with his walk, but never hailing a fellow and slow voyager, I wheeled in his wake and chased him. "Hey, what ticks in the sack, man? A bomb? Or bugs?"

He turned like a mechanical walking man, cut a small arc in the fog and came toward me, his face still strangely floating. Setting down the sack and anchoring a stance all in the same motion, he spread wide his rag-furred sleeves. With his lean dirty hands finger-bunched stiffly and looking like two signboard arrows pointing opposite ways to world's end he said, "Feel it going by. Man, feel it running past. Wherever I am it keeps rushing me." Then he stooped to pick up the sack of sounds, and except I clutched him he would have fled then and there leaving me still in the dim as to his martyrdom. For a martyr I had decided he was, a dedicated man, a saviour in his own mind, pushing at some God-big ocean of outrage, his finger in some dike that was probably too breached to be fixed now by a mountain. Somehow you can tell by the look they have, the hot beady jump of the eyes in the set face, and the sternness mixed with melancholy, and that awful awful sadness, the pity they have for those who have not yet glimpsed the Light or met Truth at high noon. "What can you do?"

"Do? I stop it as I can. I sack its measurements at midnight or high day. I push at it always in my heart and mind. I've declared war!"

"Something's threatening the world, I take it. And you're the saviour?"

"Threatening? Man! it's killing! Because of it birds tire and little pup-dogs swell up toward big-dog tragedy. It's stopping the flowers, and me. They've cut it small and jeweled it. On faces. On whirling hands. They measure why we die!"

"Why have they done this awful thing, and to what?" I asked as deep back in the dark as any questioner can be.

"An ocean on a pin would be more possible," he said.

The fog swirled by; the fog stopped and roped us in with little coils of droplets. A mist started up and the wet fell at our faces, soddening his face and making my face wet-slick. "It's your enemy as well as mine," he said, finally breaking the silence, his beady eyes dancing hotly. "The Ultimate Enemy of All - " He stooped then to pick up the bag and go. "I hit them with hammers when I get them home."

"Wait!" I cried. "What is the Enemy? I'll fight it if I know it. I fought in a war. I'm a pensioner. I'll fight it on my free time."

Something jerked in his breast then and his face split in a great coughing laugh of derision. "While the flowers go and the birds tire and little things swell up toward a tragedy, our hero will fight it on his own free time. Ho ho. But it isn't darkness," he said. "And it isn't famine or flood. On your own free time could you kill a slogan? Or a dragon? Well, yes! But on your own free time could you dent this Monster? Ho ho. I'm not sure even mine's a solution, the whole answer. But I've got a little corner of him in this bag. Hear him cry?"

All I could hear were the dim tick-ticks through the canvas bag and the fog. "If you've got a bomb in there - if you've got something infernal ready to go, in there - "

"Sorry you're scared; and yet, did I ask for your company!?" He seemed to look a long way into the fog and he shook his head as if some fog sprite had just asked him a question with a no answer. "The bag's not full yet but the night's still a long way to go."

"You mean you're still working? I thought you looked headed for home."

With a swift little kick of his wrists flicking his fingers upward he unhooked two loops from his ears and I saw a weird thing happen. Suddenly his chest was covered with dirty rippling snow as far as his belt buckle. "So you had your beard tied behind your ears," I said in a kind of child's stupefaction.

"Do I look like one who could afford to stop working against this thing?" he asked. "Do I look like Father Time even now?" he asked. "Do I have a long pointed push of hair to balance the scythe in the picture?

My beard's more like Niagara Falls. With a barrel going over. And I'm the barrel. Heh heh." He pushed a startling red strip of tongue through and waved it. — "Of course I'm still working! to answer your question. Until you stopped me I was headed up toward Courthouse Square to take the big one, big spy of the Monster. With that piece of the Monster's eye, along with what's in the bag, I could go home and sleep, knowing I'd done my best against what has wasted me. After I'd hit them all with hammers, of course, the way I do."

"But they have guards around Courthouse Square," I said, "in case you mean to steal a statue. Or one of the stone benches."

"A statue! Stone benches!" He seemed aghast. "A statue's the one thing I couldn't further my cause with. Along with streets and stones and stone benches. My cause has to do with movement, not with stone stealing. Confusing the measurement I hope to stall the rush." With that he deftly flicked up the ticking bag and fled into the night before I could stop him. I heard his feet for a long time pounding toward Courthouse Square.

I moved up there, slowly, cadging bar to bar. When I got to Courthouse Square it was near midnight and the guards were over by the fountain, drunk and having a game. It was quiet and deserted, I thought, and the fog swirled at the statues and it rippled softly over the stone benches from which I would pick a mattress. I lay down, facing the sky at an angle to favor the shoulder I had hurt on the war pension plan. And I saw him! Through the fog he looked like a big dark beetle spread over the face of the clock in the tower, and the two ends of his long beard blowing, hooked to his ears again, made him somewhat resemble a small-winged angel, if you wanted to think that hard. How he got there, don't ask me. Although I suppose he had used rope ladders. Or lineman's climbing tools. The gray sack was over his shoulder, and in my mind I could hear the sack ticking and the big clock grinding and whirring as he beetled around over the face of the town's main time. What was he doing? That he was crazy I did not much doubt. But what was he doing?

I must have dozed. For the next thing I knew the moon was over the fog like a big red fruit in a bowl of frosted milk, the clock was bonging away at twelve donges for a point in the middle darkness, and he was falling through the sky and the fog, his beard flapping as he wheeled and tumbled. His arms flailing, rag-furred and futile, he seemed to try for a stranglehold on the air, but he did not cry. Hitting he sounded like a heavy bag deposited hard on a frog. And about this time the big clock, finishing with its entirely preset cue for clanging twelve big sounds into the middle darkness, sent its last bong strident and insistent into the chill air as though a point in time in this petty fog-filled place meant something to the general scheme of the cosmos. Looking at the flat-

tened rag-bag man on the ground I suspected no special meaning in any of it.

I was the first one to him. He lay face-up, moveless and smiling, and around him were many shining objects with faces and hands. Ticking they seemed incongruous in the terrible quiet, and what they proposed to measure was wholly beside the point now to this man. I yelled for the guards and told them how he had fallen from Clock Tower. When they had gathered, entirely sane and a little drunk, and were peering at him, crane-necked like poultry, one said, "A watch thief!" And another said, "What in the world would he want with the big one from Court-house Square?" And still another said, "Crazy!" And I from the outskirts said, though no one was listening, "Who knows?" and went back to my stone mattress in the fog-filled square.

Unwarranted Departure

The departure of Little Sister was not fitting to Little Sister. Nor was it a thing for pride in any of the higher or lower echelons of the brains of anyone who planned it. And Little Brother – ? Little Brother stayed and he plays all day now, float-eyed and listless, unsubstantially, with his sets. The summer goes by outside and the heat sweeps down and flattens toward the second-week beginning cool of September and the death-time times of fall. And Little Brother launches his great toy attacks of war now with no vigor. Or maybe he'll shore up a wall in his defense compounds. With no zest. Where once he had eager brains, it seemed, and great appetites for the destruction and the countermoves, and his eyes would gleam with solid, glazed rock-hate, there is a softness now, a falling away from the compact totality of Purpose. He has seemed to disintegrate. His eyes flee; his gaze glooms in two pools, dully, and one thinks of two old bullet ends lying lost and long-gone in the rain somewhere far from any gun that could fire them. Is he crying? Are Little Brother's eyes crying!?

Maybe a talk; maybe more training. Oh God, if the answer to the world is training, we'll train!

"LITTLE BROTHER, LITTLE SIST – " and my voice starts up now a long cough-out to hide away in. "LITTLE BROTHER!" I amend, as the cough ends dry, unproductive, guttural, and somewhat embarrassed, "Training Talk time for YOU!"

He came and stood before me – chalk-faced, unnatural and like a lax old sack on legs. Where's the tight taut toughness and rebellion of the once little boy I knew, the demeanor to stand off hell, the tiger-gaze of

hate, the lowered head of the cornered proud little bull that could hold ground through a stampede or, in a sulk-fit, charge a wall? Where is the old Little Brother? "LITTLE BROTHER!" I explode, drill sergeant tall and chesty, hoping to lift him back fit for battle, though perhaps I sounded cracked and old and without the élan now to wage war myself. "Let us not think of the events of the past few days, Little Brother, when we lost a battle without fighting, without even the chance to fight. Let us wash them, flood them! those events, cold and bitter from our minds. There was no August this year, Little Brother. More especially, there was no first week in September. IT JUST DIDN'T HAPPEN at all. Some time, as you grow older, Little Brother, you will learn that this is absolutely the only way to deal with the impossible event. Turn the time back to the action. Then blot out the time of the action. Blacken the calendars! Cut out the days! - If it'll help any, I'll tell you now that I've taken the worst offending days off that big calendar we have in the bedroom we never use. Since your mother - THEY'RE GONE! Go look if you want. (AFTER the lecture!) I cut them out the way Little Sister used to cut out those hundreds and hundreds of dolls, very carefully. Then I tried to put them through the vegetable dicer, a little drunken, I'll admit. But they didn't work very well, through the vegetable dicer. (I thought they would.) I finally ended up burning them. I'll tell you now, Little Brother, and you may want to remember this - in fact, you'd better remember it, since this IS part of a lecture - though a little discursive, you may think - THE BEST WAY TO DESTROY DAYS IS TO BURN THEM! Burn them to a brown, a black, and then a crisp crisp! then hammer the ashes down to smallest smallest dust. If you rest your mind right, then, it can make any number of days as though they had never been. And I think that's the way it must come in the end, Little Brother - just days burning, in the mind and all around....

"ALL RIGHT! Let's get on with the lecture, the training talk, the PREPARATION! the learning of all! the same as we did in the good good days when Little Sister was here and your mother long gone, and I was your one staunch parent trying to get you ready, READY FOR THE WORLD! - The subject of this Training Talk is Unwarranted Departure of a Daughter, and Breaking of the Law.

("HOW DO THEY DO IT!? Oh, are they in league? How did Little Sister know which window, which night, which hour, which minute? How come she was ready? - She took clothes! I've just discovered she took clothes! She was packed! What signals do they use, these females young and old, to connive? Are they witch doctors all, and organized?")

Little Brother didn't answer me, as indeed I expected he would not. He just stood rag-dolly and listless, his gaze withered, his eyes without spark or spunk, float fishing in the sad. (Was he missing his little sister?

Or a thought that scared me more, was he hurt and dispirited because he had not been part of some grand, all-inclusive alliance to leave me entirely deserted?)

"This was Unwarranted Departure," I screamed, "Unwarranted Departure of a daughter from her father's house. Your mother had no legal sanction NO SANCTION! for taking my daughter through a sneak window in the night. I'll have you know, be not at all in doubt, after I had burned the mind-boggling event-surrounding days, I set all the law I could find that would do it to the business of finding my daughter, our Little Sister. — Can't you see them out there now, big men in blue, hard, uncompromising, law-stickler men in close-fitting blue clothes, storming up and down on their cycles and in their snoop cars, looking for my daughter and her culprit mother? And they will find them! for the law must be our fortress, as we think. Then I'll have Little Sister back (her mother will be punished) and Little Sister can rejoin our lectures. For the Training Talks that must be her own good."

Little brother just stood twisty, unmanned and nervous, and not at all the dour and sour hate-tested rock of a child I loved and admired, that was his usual in a lecture. And I myself could not manage that high élan that had once been my easy unshakable manner of uncompromising seriousness and high purpose in the old good good days. Then I had no doubt that I was rearing two hate-sure and well-prepared little battlers to be READY FOR THE WORLD. — Little Sister had, in a way, deserted the war when she had taken the easy way out to the mushy love of Mother. And the fact that she had, while I slept the sleep of the righteous hard-trying fatherhood, packed clothes for a planned withdrawal, shook me to my very toes and shoes. HOW DOES ONE WIN!?

"Little Brother," I said, all of a sudden and surprised outright, "we miss our Little Sister, don't we? Though we shouldn't be soft like this and must try not to. — The lecture this morning has gone badly. You have not assumed your proper stance and mood. I have not been my old self either. Go back to your war games now and work hard. Summon all the hate you can for the mock battles. I'll work hard on new lectures, and we'll see what we can do. Perhaps it is best that she is gone. Along with her mother who left long ago in a disagreement. Total disagreement with me. Women are unstable. They cannot hold steadily the course of hate. They cannot hold to the course of love either with most of us.

"But we are men! tending toward rocks, thank God, and hoping soon to be steel in this steel-tough world of change that surrounds us and tests us constantly. Let us go now — soon — to work hard to be better rocks and more quickly steel. — But for now, Little Brother, if you want to, go fight, or pretend to fight, some big mock battle with your toy soldiers. And if you'll keep your head down while you cry, I promise I'll not watch you. Maybe you can hide behind a fort. In fact, you have my

permission. And as for me, if you hear unusual sounds from the room we never use, the one where I think now I'll just, on further hard thinking, go mutilate that big calendar for the rest of the year, think nothing of it. Sometimes I snuff and snort and make all kinds of unusual snuffle squeaks in the very early deathful autumn time of the year. I have upper respiratory trouble. On the other hand, if you just want to guess that I'm crying, go ahead. Guess what you want to. We rocks can falter a little in the early fall of the year, I think, and not compromise our positions to any great extent. I'd rather not falter, but sometimes, it seems, there are just too many battalions in the enemy line for one to stay completely the straight Wall. This Wall would, I guess, rather bend a little than to tumble to the flat, if bending today means a chance to stand even more adamant tomorrow; and this rock would consent to leak a little from the head, I suppose, if that served to keep sanity even a little better for the big frontal assaults coming up.

"What our Little Sister has done, in conjunction with her mother, has shaken the rock, I'll tell you in all candor. Desertion is really perhaps the ultimate most degenerate thing a soldier can perform. All the crimes of commission and omission are there potential in the black act. But let us not judge too harshly Little Sister. And perhaps, anyway, those big blue arms of the law will soon grab her and bring her back to me. And after suitable and exactly, so far as I can judge and determine, adequate and fair punishment (the law can deal with her mother), we'll just fit her right back into the training grind as though nothing had ever happened at all. Though she'll be hard put to it to catch up, you can be sure of that. For I'm going to redouble my efforts with you, Little Brother, and you'd better believe that, after my failure, either temporary or complete — time will tell — with your sister. — And thinking it all over, here now, I'm almost sure this was all partly my own fault. I just left her too long with the little-girl things, such as the dollies.... BUT YOU HAVE YOUR TOY SOLDIERS! AND A HARDER MORE UNCOMPROMISING ME NOW TO TIE YOUR HOPES TO."

He didn't answer me. He seemed truly somehow diminished as he stood there, spiritless, folded in on himself, a little sad-sight boy-of-grief with chest slumped, chin downfalling and shoulders dished to a bow-bend. HELL'S FIRE, it wasn't the end of the world! Not for him, not for me. "LITTLE BROTHER," I yelled, "take the rest of the day off and get yourself in shape, get this out of your system. Then return here tomorrow, ready to go to work. THAT'S AN ORDER!"

We left it at that. He went, head-down, to cry silently with his toy soldiers, on the far side of a fort, a little boy of four, terribly alone now without his little sister, who was somewhere after three, and I went to finish the destruction of the calendar...in the room that we never used...now....

Our House

It finally happened to Our House, that old red-brick apartment. I moved away and left it to get along by itself...in the very middle of summer.

When I came home to Our House that day it seemed as usual as yesterday. The bitter old-young man downstairs, who could take himself apart, had himself on the floor again, and the old shoestring-razor-blade-pencil-peddler man down in the basement, who was all for going all the way to the pearly gates and the wings, had a religious program turned up high-loud on his ancient radio. The part-time prostitute up on third was playing long-play love records and singing to them rock-and-rolly in a cryey out-of-tune way. And the moneybags landlady was coiled up cool in one of her five rooms, adding rent, I suspected.

I knew how the big black cellar bugs were streaming over the old basement man's light housekeeping disarrangements and how he was sitting there ramrod straight, white-headed, very frail and dirty, but somehow looking clean and firm in the broken discarded chair under a big picture of Billy Graham. He would be reading, perhaps, a bulletin of Youth for Christ by the light of a small basement bulb and be looking dedicated as an apostle. At least it had been that way many times when I had taken slops down to the garbage in the big white pail. I knew how the man with his parts scattered over the floor was sitting there glowering, just glowering. Up over his TV he had a tiny American flag mucilaged to the wall. Sometimes, when he had his arm on, he would throw darts at that flag, by the hour. He had a little white-bitch dog that would frisk up and bring the darts back. I surmised how the part-time one was lying up on third with her bra off, singing, with her breasts sloppy in

her slip, smelling like fried eggs and a fading bouquet of roses. The moneybags landlady I thought of only as a wrinkled knobby snake coiled up cool.

I came on up to second to the two big dusty rooms where the dolls were, and dust on the dolls, and the shriveling balloons, and the desolation, especially the dust on the carefully-placed sleeping dolls, and felt knives go in my head and my stomach and turn there, and sweat fell through my eyes and rolled down my cheeks in the dead dry heat.

With the knives still whirling I went down to first and rapped on the door of the man who could take himself apart. The white dog tugged at a string that drew a bolt and the door swung in. He was sitting there in his stubs, the gray and grief of him making you think that all his thirty-five years had been spent on the job of getting old. His eyes strayed around to the parts that were on the floor and he seemed embarrassed. "Well?" he said. "Roy," I said, "I came to borrow your darts. If it could be that you're not attacking the flag today." He flapped the stubs of his arms that looked somehow like picked wings, and I knew it was his shrug, as near as he could do it. "Take the damn darts," he said. "But keep low on the beaches." Sometimes Roy redid some landing in his mind and his conversation. Fearing a recital I said, "Roy, I'm in hell's own hurry now, if you don't mind. Though I do respect and remember the beaches. Want me to help gather you up before I go?" "Hell no," he said. "You leave me alone! - Foofoo, find the darts for the man." Foofoo, the white bitch, methodically brought the plastic darts from under the bed, one by one, and piled them like a little mound of strange bones at my feet, pausing a bit after each delivery to play-act a wheeze and let her very-red tongue fall out. "I'll return them, Roy," I said, "when I get those damn balloons. They're getting on my mind. You probably know what I mean." His eyes strayed toward a corner of the room where a foot and a leg lay sprawled out with a purple sock and a black shoe on. "Keep low on the beaches!" he said.

I came back to the two big dusty rooms where the dolls were, dolls sleeping everywhere. "You take good care of our dollies," the biggest one had said. "You take good care of our dollies, and don't break any of our bawoons," the littlest one had said, the littlest one with the blue eyes. "Sober up again, and buy them a doll apiece..." she had said, "and a million balloons," with the coolest satire this side the icebergs of heaven. And then they were gone. - So I darted the balloons as fast as I could that day, picking my way across the dollies that already were getting a thick coat of dust on while sleeping. They wouldn't be back - she wouldn't... I wondered why I picked my way across the sleeping dolls.

When I was through with the small harpooning, ice-beads of agony stood upon my head. Quickly I drank from the bottle I had brought

with me and went up and rapped on the door of Pat, the part-time one who lived on third. She was beautiful when she was dressed for it, with her breasts up, with the fresh crisp dresses, the very-high-heeled slippers, and the fine nylons. But at home with her teats down she was slouchy as a frump. "Pat," I said, "why don't you do something about that guy on one?" I remembered the foot and the leg sprawled over toward a corner, across from where he sat by the door, and I recalled how he sometimes wiped his dead face in such a preoccupied way. "Hell, if he can't pay, I'll pay you myself." I was feeling compassionate and melancholy and very very good from the drink with the balloons finally gone. "Also that old shoestring-razorblade-pencil-peddler man down below reading *Youth for Christ* could probably do with a little some," I said and wondered why I was so sorry for everyone. "Let joy be all complete. Don't hoard."

"Don't you want me to donate the good landlady something too, just out of natural charity? And what can I do for you, White Knight?" Then she tossed her red hair. "You corny son-of-a-bitch. I don't work around here. Nor play neither. You know that."

"But the guy on one," I insisted, adamant from the drink, "he hit a beach or something. For all of us and the flag. And he doesn't have much other chance except you. Why don't you go help him salute the flag, or something?"

She slammed the door in my face, so I took the darts back to Roy. I pushed the door open, which was still unlatched, and the dog was just bringing his leg over. "Trying to get myself together to latch the door, against drafts," he said, under the circumstances quite cheerfully. "All I could do was bring you the darts," I told him. "I tried to do the right thing." I handed him the darts neatly stacked, like clean bones, in a small cradle of doll furniture. He stared at me blankly. "Tried to talk Pat into you a piece. Even said I'd pay for it." His tongue flicked out and licked his lips three times fast and his breath heaved in and out gustily. But he betrayed himself only briefly before his terrible will set in, the terrible control. "Christ sakes," he said, "who appointed you to do my *Romeoin'*, anyway?"

So I left him and the dog to get along while I clumped down to the basement to talk to the old shoestring-razorblade-pencil-peddler man reading a religious tract by the light of a small bulb. When I chided him for his dedication and asked him a few of the standard Old Doubter questions he jumped up and started stamping the black cockroaches that were trailing around his feet, and he suggested that I was a worse heathen than any one of those black-hearted bugs. In his agitation he fell to scooping up the overgrown cockroaches and pulling their heads off, all the time gazing raptly at that white-knight picture of the evangel. Seeing that it was Castles in Spain to him, the Light that ever shines, and

the Grail search through the subterranean reaches of the basements of all the world, I suddenly was more sorry for everyone than I had been all day. Meaning nothing but kindness I admitted that he had a perfect right to his opinion of me and the bugs and Billy Graham and came back up the dusty stairs.

I banged on the landlady's door. She had reserved five of the best rooms for herself on one; she overcharged on rent; she yelled at kids who crossed her yard; she whizzed the rent down to the bank in a big fish-fin car. In addition to all this she pinched us on light, heat, and hot water, and she expected the rent on time. Yes, Our House had a landlady as bad as any. When she poked her wrinkled little-birdy face out I proceeded to tell her off for being so bad. "You want to move?" she asked. "Sure," I said, "but I can't, because you've got to have my rent to take down in that big fish-fin car." She slammed the door, probably suspecting that I was drunk again.

I stood there for a little while, absently gazing at the closed door, thinking of the two rooms upstairs and knowing that I couldn't go back. And when the knives started to whirl too much in my stomach and my head, I started drinking from the bottle. At a point when I was nearly finished with the drinking I suddenly let out a scream and started, for no real reason, to run in the halls. All at once it seemed to me that a lot of blue-eyed dolls were falling through the ceiling from the second floor and black bugs big as monkeys were hind-legging up from the basement. Everything was closing in! And everything was monkeys and dolls, either coming up or coming down. I moved in fast for awhile, keeping low in the hall and looking for cover, like invasion. But finally in the confusion I just gave up and stood there yelling.

I left Our House that day and never went back. Although for a long time it bothered me, especially the dolls, so very quietly were they sleeping.

Keeping It Simple

I'm not eccentric like a lot of inventors. Keep it simple, keep it sensible, I say. Also, I'm more solidly blessed than most men because of my wife. Abundantly married is probably the best way to say this. She has her little bedroom, and I have mine; and things work out swell. She never looks into my room at night when she knows I'm there, but once a week daytimes, regular as clockwork when she know I'm not there, she comes in to flounce up the room and tidy the bed. And every year, sure, I see her in her bedroom when I take in the anniversary chocolates. (Here of late I've been getting the compact little thirty-nine-cents-a-pound one-pound sampler, because – well, age cools foolishness. I'm thirty-four; she's thirty-six). I try to hurry getting my breakfast that morning so I can see her while she's still in her bed, and nearly every year that way I collect my kiss – just as easy.... And sometimes she wakes up with that – well, if it isn't quite a smile, you could hardly say it was a very big frown either. And nearly every time she says, just as any princess might, awake and surprised at her knight there on his knees, "Fer Gawd's sake, what next?!" I hand her the chocolates, and I do not say anything. I hang around near the door to see if something is going to happen.

But what I started to say – because I'm solidly married and because I'm that kind of chap anyhow, I like to do a thing sanely, sensibly, and do it so it won't hurt the wife. So I started hunting around for this dog to fit in with a little idea I had for an invention. For some reason I got the notion that he should be a nice big dog with a tail, and not one of those little toy fellows that aren't considered in it unless the tail's off

right up next to the dog. Some of those kinds aren't big enough to make a bulge in a pocket.

I searched all the pet shops near my part of town, but mostly all they had were the little ones. And when I did find a nice-sized collie or police dog with a friendly tail, he wouldn't do because the pet-shop man wouldn't guarantee him. But I finally found an Airedale with a nice stub, way out toward Bellfontaine. And the man guaranteed him. I can see that little pet-shop man now guaranteeing that dog. "But will he wiggle it enough?" I ask. "Vill he viggie it enough!" he almost shouts in my face, so that I nearly faint from the garlic. "My friend, dese are vurry friendly type dogs. Airedales always viggie it." I looked, and he was. His stub was going as though he had been born to wiggle it. But I wasn't going to take chances. I told the pet-shop man my scheme from beginning to end, and told about how I was solidly married and wanted to keep it simple. The pet-shop man looked at me — just looked at me. But he said in the very next breath, "If any dog vill viggie it dot much, dis dog is dot dog. Haf no fears." So I bought the pooch — paid thirty-nine dollars and seventy-eight cents and named him Stub before I left the shop. "Haf no fears. Airedales stay avake to viggie it," the little man called after me.

So I took Stub home and got to work in my basement, building those cats and the things that would go schwoonk-schwuunk, schwoonk-schwuunk. I modeled the cats after a cat wall-clock I've got in my room. I made this clock after I'd seen some in the stores. The cat's tail sticks down for the pendulum and shakes back and forth along the wall. Maybe my clock won't keep time, but the pendulum sure goes!

Stub in the basement watching me work was growling at all the cats I was making, and wiggling his tail. The wife was gone, or in her room. I never search for her because I sometimes see her at supper. (If not, I fry an egg or something). But this time, when Stub and I came up from the basement, she came out of her room, yawning, looking for her glasses. Then she turned and went back in, and I didn't know. I got that frozen-custard feeling in my stomach again, like I always get when she goes back to sulk for five days.

It's no way to be married. Couples should come out of their rooms at least every other day to battle it out. And she did come on this time. She'd found her glasses. And she started to smile. I'm almost sure she started to smile. But she changed it to a yawn and just looked at Stub, who was wiggling for dear life. "Where in Gawd's name you get that silly hound?" she graveled out, in that voice, make you think she was sexed.

"He's no hound," I spoke up stoutly. "He's an Airedale, name of Stub. I got him cheap — to sleep in my room. I'll make him a little box and throw in a little rug. We'll get along swell."

The soul mate yawned widely, started to move off, then came back and towered over me with those pale gray eyes and that funny flaming hair. "You'll have to fry a sausage or something," she said. "I'm too-o tired." Then she turned and went back, and I noticed how those war-horse hips walked like two big flexible boxes under the wrinkled slip she'd slept in. I tried not to think about it.

Stub and I got supper. I fried sausages and eggs, and we had big bowls and glasses of milk. I watched all the time to see if Stub was a real happy wiggler. He was, and I felt better just watching him. I began to do mental nip-ups about my scheme.

After supper Stub and I went back to the basement where I worked some more on the simple gadget I was making. Stub showed interest in the cats, and that pleased me. So much depended on Stub and those cats. After I'd finished the cats, I got to work on the gears and the rubber bladders and the truck-driver's horns. Also I fixed the levers with the pillow-shaped mallets, one mallet of plain wood, the other of wood covered with felt. Then I built Stub's racecourse, trying all the time to keep things simple.

Later that night I sneaked the apparatus past the wife's room. Stub walked at my heels. I decided we'd have a trial run. So the gears to the cats I'd made I hooked to the tail of my cat wall-clock and then hooked up the cats to the gears. Next I fixed the levers so they'd trip and activate the mallets that would wham the bladders that would blow the truck driver's horns. Last I put Stub in his racecourse, the big egg-shaped cage where he could gallop almost at full speed if he wanted to. He wanted to because those cats were scampering merrily along in front of him, pulled by that wall-clock tail and gears made with my simple inventive genius. Stub was wiggling his stump in glee and galloping and pouncing at the cats. And the thing was working! Each time Stub raced up one side of the course it would go *schwoonk*; when he raced down the other side it would go *schwuunk*. *Schwoonk-schwuunk, schwoonk-schwuunk*. It was simply those horns going. When Stub pell-melled up one side he tripped a lever that made a plain wood mallet wham into a bladder; down the other side a felt-covered mallet whammed a second bladder. I had those old rubber bags fixed to truck driver's air horns, and with a little tinkering in reeds I had things just as I wanted — *schwoonk-schwuunk!*

Well, I guess you have a lot of questions, like why did I want that dog to be a big dog, and why did I want that dog to have a tail, and why did I want him to wiggle his tail, and why did I want to go *schwoonk-schwuunk, schwoonk-schwuunk* in the first place. With my special knack for cutting right through to the heart of problems, the way I see it is this: a big dog wiggling his tail is a big dog awake, a big dog awake is a big dog chasing cats, a big dog chasing cats is, in this case, a big dog tripping levers, and a big dog tripping

levers is those truck driver's horns going schwoonk-schwuunk, schwoonk-schwuunk. And with me snoring those real, authentic truck-driver horn snores in my bedroom, the wife will never check; she won't! I can be out somewhere — anywhere! all night long, helping friends home from taverns, flagging taxis for beautiful girls and doing all manner of real fine things. So, you see...it's not so hard when you're an inventive genius...keeping things simple... cutting right through to the heart of problems...

Investigating the Bidwell Endeavors

Actually, for two crazy people, I thought they had a pretty good service, when I first heard about it. Not that I set too much store by it, naturally, being the way I am, scientific and realistic, but I regarded it as pleasant, thoughtful of others, unselfish, very very unusual, harmless and probably something to be entirely avoided by any sane normal person wherever he might be. But my curiosity was such that I couldn't leave it alone. I had to see, had to investigate. And now that I'm back from seeing, I'm not so sure that any of my first, hearsay impressions of this business were valid, or even accurate.

You see the Bidwell twins, sisters, were the ones operating this little service. And when I say twins, sisters, I know you surely are going to get right down to thinking of cute little twin sisters you've known, as alike probably as two little twin China dolls might be, waiting all dressed up for a party or tripping down morning-glory paths toward school buses. But don't think of anything like that. Think of the Bidwell sisters, old, wrinkled, spinsterish, gray, faded, one short, one about a foot taller than any woman ever should be — that kind of twins. And while you're thinking of that kind of twins, think of them standing side by side looking like some great gaunt bird and its shrunken hairy egg, dressed in starchy white, on the clean white porch of their clean white mansion in a clean little mid-America mid-twentieth-century town. (No, they'll not be taking a break from their self-appointed professional duties. Not exactly. They'll be waiting for the mail.) And while you're about it, don't forget to think of their eyes, clear blue, like the blue of a December sky looking down on snow. Real evangel eyes, you'll think at

first, but on second guess you won't know what to guess, probably, so you'll just stall for time and think of other matters.

Like a first floor room all littered with papers, you'll think of that. And a postman toiling hard up the street, leading with both hands a big postal bag on a cart, bringing the Bidwell mail, more dailies than the rest of the town all put together takes. Then if you look around back, in the backyard, you'll see the mountains and foothills of stacked newspapers and the neat, wired bundles of clippings, all waiting for the Boy Scouts to come and haul them away. After a while, just looking at these tall hillocks and big peaks of paper, you'll begin to get a little of the feel of the enormity of the Bidwell undertaking.

Then from a vantage point in the backyard, on top of a Mt. McKinley of old news, maybe, you'll look at the Bidwell house, really look at it, especially the roof. And you'll see that the roof on top of that three-story house, a mansion by the standards of small-town turn-of-the-century America, bristles with metal crosses and wires and gray speaker cones. Then if you think of money and expense, you'll wonder why-in-the-world-did-they-do-it. But...remember the stories...and how old Bidwell, the elder, did have money, much money, as well as two odd-size daughters...and some eccentric dreams....

Three stories down from a roof that clamors and talks you go up the white marble steps, up to a porch and a white door marked PATIENTS ENTER HERE, and you tell whoever answers the doorbell, lying as you go, that you have been sent by the state to investigate Bidwell Endeavors, just a routine check, naturally. And you flash a false badge and a name and you push on in to the first floor room that reminds you vaguely of operating rooms you have seen. It is hard to know just why it does that, exactly, except maybe for the neatness and the white, and the evidence of much cutting and severing. Many shiny shears and other cutting edges are prominently to be seen in that big room. But the newspapers spread on the operating tables throw the picture all out of perspective in your mind. But really now — just your being here — doesn't that deny that you really hoped for anything to stay in normal perspective in your mind?

Suddenly you are aware of one salient fact: you are standing alone in a big white paper-littered room with Miss Angela Bidwell. And for all that you are over half a foot more than six feet tall, she in her flat-heel nursing shoes is looking straight into your eyes, on the level. Only it isn't really a straight-in steady look; it's all wrong to claim that it is. This is more like being hit in the eyes with pulsations of cold blue water, you somehow think, and yet her eyes seem very dry. You finally settle for thinking about blue pieces of ice flailing into your eyeballs, and you stand there afraid that you are going to shake. Why doesn't she speak? You have given a name, stated your business, and

you have shown her the false badge. And it looks authentic enough, doesn't it?

When finally she does start to speak, you see her mouth open and close with the words, but the sounds have that eerie quality of coming from somewhere farther removed, down from some greater height, like maybe out of the ceiling. "Mr. Frine," she says, dry, like a fingernail file on a bone, "the world is full of sickness, and we are all physicians. Or should be. As Father always said. Likewise, we are all patients, Mr. Frine. Or should be. As Father always said. — I hope you understand." I nodded, and held my eyes against the smiting pieces of cold.

When she spoke again she seemed apologetic. "I am sorry you did not come in proper form to be admitted, Mr. Frine. You seek help. We all seek help. And some of us seek to help. — But perhaps you did not understand. You'll have to get regular, Mr. Frine."

"I came to investigate your hospital," I shouted. "I'm from the state," I lied. "It's routine. I'm not sick!"

My shout brought the short sister pounding up from the basement, and after a silence a strange clamor had started in new, upstairs. I noticed as she came bouncing in that she had a box of electrical fuses in one hand. She smote me with dry blue eyes, cold, very much like her sister's, and she spoke as though my being there was the most natural-normal thing in the world. "Right in the middle of alleviation for Mr. Bent and all the rest, it goes," she panted. "The electric goes off. I'm scared. I'm thinking ho, no! Not those expensive installation men again. I fly down to the basement. Luckily it is just a fuse. I replace it. And now Mr. Bent and all his fellow sufferers can just go ahead and be alleviated. I'm so happy for Mr. Bent and all his fellow sufferers in the ward. In the ward and in the world!" Then she looked at me as if seeing me for the real first time. Her mouth opened and closed twice without sound and finally she said to her tall icily staring sister, "Why, what in the world!? He can't be admitted into this room in this form. What would dear dead sainted Father say? Why has he come here? — Oh, we do wish to help, but —"

"I'm not a patient," I yelled. "I'm not sick. I'm an investigator. From the state."

"Oh, but we're all patients," the tall icily staring sister cut in, "all ill. That's what makes it so worthwhile — and wonderful — that we're all with the power of physician. All sick and all physicians. What a wonderful Power...to have planned it so. As Father always said." And her eyes became glittering points for a little instant.

A sound outside, on the porch, of some ponderous bundle going into a box startled both of the sisters to life and made their eyes dance away from me and shine with cold lights. "The new patients are arriving," Miss Angela said. And Miss Angia said, "Oh, yes! such a big bun-

dle of them this morning. How lucky they are to be here. How lucky we are to be here to help them. What a wonderful Power — " Then both sisters rushed outside to heave and pull at the patients until they had them all inside the white room that was — and I hadn't been wrong here — the operating room. I watched Miss Angela and Miss Angia select with a show of pleasure the sharpest blades and the shiniest shears, and when they became absorbed with the searching out of the patients, I slipped away.

I went upstairs to the second floor, toward where a clamor was, where, I supposed, Mr. Bent and the rest were having their alleviations. I was prepared for something eccentric, but thinking of it in bars now, or in my room late at night when the lumps in the bed are big and gnaw at me and I cannot sleep, or when the rains all day rain down on the blue-Sunday windows, I cannot tell myself that I was really prepared. Is one ever really fully prepared for anything, though? Aren't we always in the state of preparing? Or, as Miss Angela said, "All are patients."

There had one time been six huge rooms upstairs on the second floor of the Bidwell mansion. But now the partitions were down and what had once been six was now one, one mammoth room of white beds, rows of them arranged as in a hospital. By each hospital-sheeted bed was an apparatus of wires and speaker cones and a tape recorder playing — softly, soothingly, playing the Bidwell prayers to what looked to me like empty beds. My mind groped for something tangible out of the soothing sounds of the prayers and all this eerie scene, and I thought of Mr. Bent. Look for Mr. Bent, that was the thing to do! Miss Angia had as good as said he was up here — Mr. Bent.

So I, a fake state investigator, motivated by more curiosity than ever has been good for me, went up and down the white rows of the beds, looking among the beds and the wires and the prayers for a Mr. Bent. When I found him, or I mean found his bed, he wasn't there! The Bidwell prayers were spewing their soft urgency at an empty bed, or so it seemed to me. I looked at the fever chart on the end of the bed. It indicated that Mr. Bent was still in need of much much help. Oh, he was in a bad shape according to his chart. "Mr. Bent," I cried and there wasn't any answer, though the prayers went on undiminished. "Mr. Bent, in your shape you shouldn't be out of bed, Mr. Bent." In desperation I flung the covers back. And there was Mr. Bent! Taped to his bed! He was smiling. A man of about forty, he had killed his wife and his kids, all six of the little Bents. And then he had run away with his beauteous luscious mistress. Or so some newshawk had said. — Oh no, Mr. Bent. No! No! Mr. Bent.

And upon closer looking, I saw that the other beds were not empty either. Not by a handful of paper! Terrible humanity was in them. Some had pictures, and all had descriptions, descriptions of foul deeds in

them. Oh, Mr. Bent! No! And all the Mr. Bents! No! As I fled down the stairs, with the soft urgent Bidwell prayers still hammering through my head and gnawing at my mind, I hoped I might sneak out unnoticed past the surgeons still busily, almost joyfully, it seemed, cutting the patients. But it was not to be. Two pairs of stark blue eyes flared up from their work and held me. "Oh no, Mr. Frine," Angela said. "You'll have to come in the right way and be admitted properly, Mr. Frine. Then we'll be happy to help you. You'll just have to be regular, Mr. Frine."

Somehow, I don't know how, I unhooked from those four blue eyes and fled. But once out in the sun and running I couldn't resist looking back again and again at the house of the Bidwell Endeavors, especially at the roof of that house where all the metal crosses and wires and cones were and the Bidwell prayers going out worldwideward toward heaven and the objects of their help. And on my way home from that town I couldn't keep from wondering how in the world would be the best way for me to enter that special and specialized upstairs of prayer. Should I go kill my wife and four kids or just hurry and hold up a bank? Or maybe to cheat on taxes would be enough to get me a front-page portrayal!

From the Fishbowl

He was just a fish like millions of fish safe-at-home in bowls all over America. He swam his tight circles; he ate his store-bought fish food; he fouled his glass bowl normally and had to be cleaned up. Then one day, watching him swim all his tight circles to Nowhere, closely hugging the sides of his bowl the way he always did so well, I thought of a novel way to relieve his monotony and perhaps, at the same time, explode him into history as the first and only fish to have such a high-tech thing befall him. And oh, SO sophisticated –

Along with my tedious preparation of the instrument for the execution of the novel experience that would employ the most advanced of tech, I worked long and hard and went to no little expense to set up a battery of three cameras to fully record this history-shaking event. I wanted a camera in front for a head-on shot, to certify what surely would be scientifically invaluable, and also I thought I required a camera on either side to record each eye and how it surprise-wandered or lock-froze or merely “swam” away at the precise instant of my finely-planned moment in history.

Yet I must convey to you: the means-to-document was, by comparison, the easy part; for that entailed really little more than a run-of-the-mill application of practical photomanship to set up the cameras and arrange to have them operated at the right hairline moment in historical time-flow – by a routine alignment of pulleys, gears and trip-levers activated by a small windmill set turning by some hot air. On a timer. The hot air would be furnished through a hole surreptitiously cut – and kept lidded until needed – in one of my twenty-two hot air distributor pipes

on my splendid old-monster furnace in the basement of my ancestral home. (I always say be simple; save tech; never debase computer hardware or software on that you can do with a furnace pipe in your basement. — It's just a mind-set credo, a heartfelt whim. YOU take it or leave it.)

Now the other! the execution of the act to be recorded, THERE was a thing monstrously hard to achieve, but once achieved must surely confirm my status as a science giant of great inner fire and stellar research promise (which I most confidently believe I am) and an outstanding technological innovator (which I most hotly aspire to be remembered as throughout the entire civilized world). — For my daring and fine plan, I required a bit of metal almost to the clarity of unpolluted air, or perhaps better, the no-color of clean, uncompromised raindrops. It must be of a thinness, and yet a toughness, almost to defy reason, let alone description. It must be capable of taking an edge of such a rare and unusual refinement as to make the "sharpest blades ever honed" seem, by comparison, blunt as a toddler-toy rubber axe. (Without very much trouble I found this metal, I am happy to report to you, among the tough new alloys developed by our routine factory sciences.)

A generous portion of this near-magical produce, together with explicitly stated and richly illustrated-blueprinted specifications, I sent on to one of the great manufacturing concerns noted for their successes with 'special projects' in our broad, brave and ever-onward land. (OH, forward in tech forever — YES — joyfully we DO on!) — I paid them generously, many thousands in happy dollars (for I am a rich, only-child inventor-heir [*gadgets for the homes of homo sapiens*] let me say, as well as a sober young genius lavishly and variously educated in several universities across this sprawled country, and widely taught on abroad), and I knew they, the Moguls of Manufacture, would never question why I had procured a thin slice of their new alloy to the general no-hue of raindrops, and why now I must have this dull slab millions of times sharper than the sharpest edge ever honed. (No one in these great days of computer mushroom to glorious total takeover questions any magnificent employment of tech! or asks if it is going to be good for us in the long pull to a betterment that really means. So to ask would certainly mark one as a dull dud, lacking in the "spark and spunkle that shines for modern times," and better off dead! Oh pooh! on anyone who would try to.) To keep THEM from pondering too probingly upon the dullness and homey usualness of a little old fishbowl, which I included along with the general requirement for suction cups, I laid it right out there in their faces in tidy postscript form and told them plain: I am a budding tech genius who practices hard keen science in full agreement with my chronological age and my time-in-history place. HOORAY for genius Progress.

So I settled down to wait the long days through until my order should come home from the big factory all those many miles out there (where the cheap help was). To while the tedium, I wrote long Letters to Future Days, giving my solid-pungent, little-jewel views on almost every weighty moral subject of modern times. For I had no doubt at all that my fish and I soon would accomplish things in tech that would make my social judgments seem of very great moral moment to future peoples and periods. Perhaps centuries on would see this name not dead! — In one unusually sober segment, I drew up a rather detailed set of contingencies and responses for our personal and national conduct-to-counter, should our wonderful nuclear power plants ever be nuked by a hostile sovereign government, or governments, bent upon a total, or even a partial, revision of our sacred core philosophies. (Pooh on those who would say run Run RUN and pray Pray PRAY. That's not tech. Tech WILL protect. Tech WILL find a way. HEY!) Then I went on record in a document to be placed in the time capsule (along with my *Letters to Future Days*) letting any follow-up world know in no quibbling manner that I endorsed tech, and no one would ever revise me on that point! Next, since I had just about written myself out on almost every important iffy subject for the time being, even unto trilogies on them (repeating myself three times, as any good science fiction writer soon learns to do — tee hee), and my order still had not come in from the big factory that I had to believe was doing its best for me (perhaps even now they had my request targeted well within their computer bomb sights!), I began to putt GO-GO golf balls on my den carpet, zonking brand-new orbs into precision-made little holes I had carved into the home wall's southern wing just right for these state-of-the-art leisure pellets to take wall-board-hidden trips around my old house's dark avenues, down considerable lengths of ancient tin (no doubt quite webbed and sooted, from close to a century now) and at the end plunk, very like unto dirty giant hail balls, down into my basement's furnace area — putt-rundle-thunk putt-rundle-thunk putt-rundle-thunk — hour upon fun relaxing hour, while I waited for my order to come home. Come home and lay the groundwork for a novel, unique befallment for my historical (to be) fish! YES!

(These kinds of things make for days that are SO modern, I sometimes — nearly always — think, and I believe it.)

SO — it was just as I hit the millionth kill-time ball (an estimate! now!) that a tingling messaged through my central bowels (personal-radar guts!) telling me that it was the day. Waiting must end, must always somehow come to its term. Aren't a million putted GO-GO's (holed) enough standing aside for almost any standing aside, even unto human patience at the Dangerous Edge? Plus the trilogy opinions, let us not forget, that I had done like the good science fic — I broke for the

window, and he moved into my vision as I searched for him in the throats of all the sidewalks that white Monday, the old gray post person on his daily way! But how slowly he moved through the pale inner lanes of snow to the red mansions! a strange fish, head-up, tail-down, just seeming to drift-bob the blue-jelly air as if in some quiet, persisting predicament, but still afloat! in a thick-water suspension. Was this that poor excuse then, that holdover from a time almost prehistoric, that was to play cold midwife to my high hopes and the great factory tech? How dare an age so teched to be so far unteched in this important aspect! Should not my filled order be zinging in by street-level pressure carrier – from factory dock to personal receiving depot – notified sufficiently in advance, by point-of-origin computer programming, the dropoff target time into my receptor basket's hungry ears?

Suppose this day was the irrevocable unstayable day for the Gaunt Taker to come for the thin postman's drab unshining life and unlock his soul-case for Death. Would I dare to go where he fell heartfaltered and all undone in the tire-gashed snow just prior to my mail slot, and rummage through his old brown sack, whirl the letters and postcards out until I found my parcel? Would I dare? Tampering with the U.S. mails! Would I risk THAT? Even for tech? SO – why not whiz-cars bearing down on receptor baskets waiting, poised for these important consignments?

He passed on by that day without so much as a bird glance at my door! just moved on across my front windows like some vague ghost going home to a rendezvous in the snow at a bent-roof house where he left a C.O.D. Under eaves of icicles like tusks of a giant Thing, I thought, he loafed there, exchanging small (probably) unnecessary (surely) ideas with an old bow-back female, while science opportunity, frustrated and foiled by non-delivery, fumed and sputtered at my place.

Next day or so, at loose ends and still hanging, but dogged-set and in the will determined not to fall back to putting (or writing either) I microwaved me an oven full of balls – for sweet eccentricity's sake and a reason, too (in case you think I was but being fey) – until they all were tea-roll GO-GO's (crisp and brown!) and he rang! Quickly and accurately, I bombardiered still waters with ten of the bakery balls (to Florida the fishbowl! in case you think I was but being mad, to give my historically-destined darling – poor, unsuspecting fish – a resort temperature for one brief warm-swim time – against all the dead-cold aeons he very soon must own, and thus show too that a scientist just might know sentiment). Then I ran down to the good gray old post person; and he left me a neat parcel exceedingly thin and tight from the wonderful factory so many miles boondocked (but smokestacked to challenge the clouds and the heavens) out where the cheap help was. As a kind of afterthought, it seemed to me, the gaunt courier with the look

of death not long away in his eyes, or anyway retirement, plumbed the depths and searched far back to find for me in his very-old-leather postal pouch another and more ordinary box. This I supposed contained the attachments. Rid of strange cargo, he moved on out then without a word to friendly exchange and fought the streets on down as best he could in all the slipperiness of the powder snow, the coldness of the hour; and his age I'm sure was not helping. Standing there looking at what I held that he had lugged in for me on a bad day, against all inclemency, I could only be glad that he had lasted long enough to reach my address and fill my hands with what I needed for my fish, for tech and for history. And now I must be about using these fine things.

In a kind of euphoric trance I ascended to my second-floor ten-room work place for tech and dreams. The fishbowl swam a pampered golden guest (I was aware) who seemed to find no end of ways to wiggle fins and lash tail to raise and lower himself among the random positioning of the warmer-balls I had chosen to bomb him with for a last swim-Florida. I watched him almost hypnotize me with that.

Dragging my mind loose from the swimmer, gloating on plans I had and well-schooled in the immense drama of the unusual, I looked at old college memories until late in the afternoon, held reunions with some other recalled reminders of my young-and-almost-splendid life and was totally preoccupied (smug) until about nightfall. Then I began to climb staircases to fuller rooms of joy Joy JOY as I "turned on" floods of hope and piled the splendid memories over the marvelous mementos higher Higher HIGHER in a mighty mental celebration before stacking it all behind a partition marked for me in an alcove of special and dusty family heirlooms. (Yes, in the modern way, OF COURSE I had some drugs.) The Past was fine, but as beginning, and I had been a treasured campus darling across the schools I trod, with the family inventor money and "cookies" from home to side me, but NOW it is I who must truly DO. A man of DO I must BE, for the Past, for the Present, for the Future yet to thunder and a great Scientific Victory. YES! It was my Heritage, my Preparation and my Responsibility, splendid little crosses to bear, if you will. DO permit me: reap the fish, tech him NOW! my best hope it would seem of going early "to my meant star." My packages in hand from the doughty old post person had surely brought it down to just a matter of "going for it." For wide and wildfire fame. For an accomplishment to rock and rattle the entire civilized world. For a startlement almost too — Maybe a Nobel!? Anyway THE Academy. Ah, Dreams — Ah, tech — Ah, Modern Times — (I was twenty-nine. I was running in the wind.)

(As I guess you are aware, IT doesn't have to mean anything, or make life any better, or help, or be any good. Many do; ALSO! some don't. [Like splitting the atom.] But IT does have to be immensely hard to bring off, complicated, and use a lot of tech. THEY have to be able to headline

when they write about IT: "HE LEAPED HIGH FROM THE SHOULDERS OF SCIENCE GIANTS, CAME DOWN ON THEIR HEADS AND CATA-PULTED FROM THERE TO TAKE A FARTHER GIANT'S PEEP." YES! Making existence any fuller, kinder, sweeter and enriching the Meanings – NOT strictly to the point – quite O.K. if it does and richly all right if it doesn't – so I honestly, fondly believed my fish and I had a chance.) YOU be the judge.

I stalked the bowl in the dark, grabbed the guest by his tail, took him thus from his day bowl, which was clear and now had the microwaved balls, and placed him in his night bowl, which was blue and had gray-green simulated sleep rocks – stones phonied to fool not fish but people looking into fishbowls. After which I started working on The Plan.

Throughout half the long winter night, working in splendidly-dedicated totally-involved completely-isolated concentration (just I against The Problem) I was without nature's sweet glances of moon or stars, or the inspiration of fresh frosty air (my shades were drawn, my windows were tight and storm-paned) – just the man-induced facts of my various work nooks, the Great Knowledges of tech times that were all about me permeating my every thought and pore, and a born tinkerer's gadget meditation-alcove fixed up very nearly like a shrine (OH YES!) richly equipped with a marvelously increasing number of today's wonders of do-it-yourself power tools, along with mighty examples of little home computers. Almost in a tranced state of the modern individual's tech-creation wish-and-do-it syndrome, I fixed at the thing almost the clear-see of air, more the no-color of raindrops, millions of times sharper than the "sharpest blade ever honed" – with the suction cups fixed it to his bowl, out from the glass-curved wall precisely half the measured thickness (calipers!) of my small fish swimming his tight bowl-hugging circles. Then, fully sustained, incredibly fulfilled, I retired – SATISFIED! (WELL – of course I had had me some drugs, in the modern way.) But I wasn't a fiend. And I hoped he might be sleeping well and dreaming sweet by the simulated gray-mossed-stones in his blue bowl for night hours, or drifting those slow rippleless circles (in which he hugged his bowl's walls so VERY well and rubbed them bright) in completest snugged safety in his half-sleep those final life times for him as fish. Tomorrow, and quite early, I must feed him his last "floater nuggets" of the "science-balanced" fish chow (guaranteed to be all a goldfish ever would require to maintain him healthy in a prisoner bowl) and then put him to his history-triggered swim. For Destiny's great run.

In the lower bowels of my old ancestral dwelling place that next morning there was a splendid roaring as a raised lid on a central control pipe called for increased effort from my ancient, though magnificent and venerable old-monster furnace that, through my early boyhood

tinkering, was fully capable now of handling the job of warming all my twenty-two bulging rooms of gadgetry. And just at that time in historically-sequenced consequence, and all by inevitable occurrence of course, and not meaning anything more than that, I am convinced (not that could, at any rate, in any way be proved) a chill rack of clouds centered over my place and spattered my roof and house sides with tiny pellets for a long hard time; a grainy blanket of splendid gray sleet soon lay upon the powder snow in my sprawled yard of several acres and gratingly whizzed, whispered and hissed there when the wind blew. And as if all this wasn't enough to make the morning fitting and fine, though different and weird, a jet plane squadron, right out of nowhere it seemed, entered the local air space to set up for a series of tall practice dives that far exceeded the speed of ANY previous people's needs, certainly including cave men and surely YOUR parents and mine (but it seemed SO just right for NOW), burst wide the countryside, broke open the coldball sky and let fly with huge clatters of CLAP-BOOMS! that I'm certain some citizens read as doom-sounding while they tumbled from their couplings on rocky-pulse mattresses and from under electric spreads. (But I DID not!) Houses shuddered, windows shattered, bathtubs danced, and plumbing pipes buckled until they bled (some of them). Citizens provident, prepared with policies, RAN for these and searched the small print, even as they were trying to come to terms with the BOOM, the shudder, the shatter, and the sudden sleet that found their windows unseasonably open for entrance of nature's collant things. For some it was a time for sucking it up, and that was for certain! For me it was omen time that history must very soon explode, and all in my favor. THAT VERY DAY!

My small fish ran for the bend. He went into it near the wall, fins up and tail driving, nose arrowing true-course and body knifing water to speed lines as he strongly surface-swam; and he didn't even shudder when he hit where the thin thing was. He whizzed on by in a fast glide, fins frozen, no tail driving now, no movement now except forward, and at first I thought he, through a near-incredible last-split-second knifing down, had missed it. Genius eyes glued to the bowl, wild hopes starving and desperate, I started to dance in my frenzy, my frustration and my high sense of "probably just another failure." Then something started to lag behind something! A fish and a half I saw, then one and three quarters fine fishes coming toward me! and at last two whole half-fishes head-on, not straining, perfect and thin in the bowl, in red-stripped water. And so he fell apart as though edged light had passed through him on the fly; half way around again he just lay on his sides two times in what looked to be double perfection's twin-equal pieces. And that was the way my magnificent little goldfish surfaced the red-

dening waters, his exquisite and frail body as cleanly divided, as starkly postured, as dead! as a wax fish halved on a block. (He never even knew what hit him! – probably).

It was through; it was done. SUCCESS! Just what I wanted. Great day! He had but slim chance (clearly) even to feel what sliced him so fantastically to so quickly, quietly and scientifically make him not a fish alive. And all the intricacies, the nuances, the incredibly sophisticated overtones that were breakthrough were recorded for Science in the fine foresight of my planned photography activated by the furnace pipe I had harnessed to this occasion of my successful achievement of employing high tech to divide a little goldfish. YES! (And don't forget – in the arsenals of world powers now – stealth destruction is the REALLY IN!)

But wait! Oh dazzle! Sharp thinking! Keen! Genius forward! Progress reach-out! – It struck me with its overpowering rightness, like the sun showing up on long, wide beaches of sparkle-light, calm, undimpled, cleanest, purest snow after a stalled period of sour gloom under clouds solid-pack. Why stop with half a sea of icebergs? Why quit when the world lies sprawled for a giant New Dawn unfolding in a fresh big Situation Day for further Progress. Take the whole bright pot of fame while the white flames roar and soar and the mind hot on glory's track with a perfect success rate of one! gulps its dazzle-glow and GROWS! FAME! – I do hope I am making myself clear. HERE!

What really I mean IS, I am getting ME another goldfish. And I am making ME a grid! this time, of that fabulous metal that has no more color than clean air and no more hue than rain dropped into that clean air, though the droplets spend a whole wet hour there whirled. And the grid The Grid! above all, THE GRID!! – it must take the edge of the almost-impossible sharpness. Oh, dream me a mesh so thin in its parts, so multiple in its divisions, so invisible in its completeness that it will be (to any rational conceptual thinking – think of it, Think of it, try! try! THINK of it!) finally so solid-almost-nothing in its metal menace that it will be MUST BE sheer magic in its capability of myriad-multiple slicing (disappearance-dicing) any fish ANY THING! (that hits it) all gone in one flash-instant – POUFF! fish (thing) NO-MORE! YES, from the wonderful factory that has lit a flame this bright and hurled a torch this high must come help now for the thing tremendous; with factory produce rightly rectified I shall bring off an essence event that in its reality-gain must impact finally the Main flow of all that we think we have known of this our world. In short, with my near-impossible wonder grid I shall dice a fish SO small, said fish won't be there at all – POUFF! GONE!! – PROGRESS!? YES!!

While jet planes ripple the sky with their splendid coughs and clap thunder, while lean hard astronauts whirl to record upper wonders, while the bomb makers tinker and tally with all their vast expertise and

successful past experiences brought to bear for a more protective product for us all, I'll make my strong bid too. THEN – let those who judge such things and assess arsenals try telling ME that I have not thrown some good strong weight into the scale balances. Let those who keenly know, and train to tell, evaluate fairly, honestly, and then say whether or not it is I who have begot something bold and new that only takes tech (further) development, tech (further) application, and SMART COMPUTERIZED harnessing-in to be fantastically capable of zapping quietly, efficiently, with no-remaining-stain erasure (in completest stealth execution), anything! Anything!! ANYTHING!!! in the whole entire wide waiting world, whether that thing glides through global waters, rides in Earth's envelope air, or slithers within the planet's crust of rock, soil, roots, rot and all that we have come to know as Home, our sacred basic ground. (State-of-the-art Death?!) HO! Frankly, I think so....

(In tech times, how GOOD it is to BE – MAN ALIVE!).

In the Complaints Service

I'm not a pleasure-crowded man with a feel-suit, lounging back in one of those big-deal bubble-dome homes soaking up sensations. I'm a Servicer. Been in some phase of the Complaints Service for about forty years, and proud of it too. The Complaints Service, if I may be allowed to explain myself a little, is an absolute necessity to modern living, and we're really the most important workers in the world, if I may be allowed to brag a bit, though we're not paid like it, if I may be allowed to complain at a pay scale. Complaints Service, in short, is what our modern pleasure-loving people require to complete their kicks in modern living by, pardon the expression, kicking about what they think is lacking in modern living. It's as simple as that. And when we get a complaint about a pleasure lack we just send out a crew and a machine to fix things up.

But let me give you a rundown on a job we went on yesterday, and maybe that'll help explain the service, as well as give you a little idea of how we're living out here in Brave New Hap – the happiest, the most modern, the most complete country in the world. I was part of the on crew that day – it was yesterday – when the word came in, that big blue-green EMERGENCY on our Alert Screen, meaning that some desperate lack had arisen in one of the bubble huts, those modern domed homes in the hinterland of Brave New Hap. We didn't slide down the pole like those dramatic firemen are expected to do at any little blaze; we went upfloor slowly, with dignity, in our basket ride, thinking things over. Slonk, our crew leader, was grim, the way he gets when that blue-green word comes in, and the rest of us were resting in the

basket ride, thoughtful and attentive – eyes wide open and planning – as befits a member of the Complaints Service at all times.

Slonk broke the silence, as befit him, being the leader, and said, "Gott tam, husband-wife again." We nodded drowsily, our eyes open and attentive, at something we already knew. Blue-green meant husband-wife EMERGENCY, no doubt about that. Red-pink was for children, yellowish-orange for old aunts, purple-violet for widowed fathers, and on like that. Each hue has its meaning in the broad range of EMERGENCY as it flashes in to us from the Complain Units of the bubble huts. Other than that and the hut's location our information is usually skimpy, which translated into terms you can understand means we usually go with a General. The Generals, the latest things in the Complaints Service, are machines designed to analyze individuals, evaluate situations and cope generally with all eventualities. We used to go with the Basics and then call in the Specials when we saw we had to have them. But the Generals do the job now of both the Basics and the Specials, maybe not quite to the fine line we used to have, but you have to give up something when you broaden your base. Don't you? And we've broadened our base! Those Generals are huge machines.

Upfloor we of the crew lounged around on our yellow float-bunks for ten minutes, cracked a few jokes into the Joy Booster if we felt like it, and generally we got in that relaxed fine mood necessary for the blue-green EMERGENCY. Slonk sat at a gently undulating nylon kidney desk, muttered Gott tam, Gott tam, as befit him being a leader, and read a few case histories of blue-green EMERGENCIES of the past. Then Slonk, in that terribly dignified and dramatic way he has, belched, and he stood up tall, very tall in his spangled cream and silver uniform of a crew leader of the Complaints Service, and his shapely thighs sloped toward his black guardsman's boots like two good limbs of the old Mr. Americas. We of the crew, all four of us, popped from our soof-air bunks and stood tall as we could and respectful in our night-black garb of the inconspicuous uniform of the crew. We knew the time of the grimness was on us. We went to select a General. We chose Kelly.

Kelly is of the K-5 design, the latest of the Generals, a huge ball on wheels that can unfold wings and take to the air when time is precious, say in the triple-A EMERGENCY, pink-red for bored-kids-fighting. But this was the husband-and-wife blue-green, which in the long run would probably be worse than a pink-red bored-kids-fighting, but not so immediately so. So we stuck to the wheels, and Kelly sped with the special homing devices toward the bubble hut from whence the distress signals had originated. Across the plastic yards and fields of Hap we raced – it was yesterday – a jolly crew, spring, you know, plastic flowers and metal blooms up everywhere through the yard holes, the winey

smell of gardens on the wind from the smells sent out by the Central Seasons Committee for spring, and the birds, the tin birds popping up everywhere and spurting off across the spring-blue sky and singing, singing until their tapes gave out. Ah spring!

But here was Kelly homing in on a bubble hut where husband-wife trouble was. And we were the crew of the Complaints Service on the spot. Kelly braked in and set wheels before a hut and we sprang down, jaunty, you know, and yet assault-like, in that special invasion efficiency we use in the Complaints Service. Puts bounce in our work and makes us seem all business, which we are. We surrounded the place and peeped in through small glass portholes in the thick plastic walls. And we saw the young husband sitting encased in all the usual pleasure-and-sensation devices that are standard equipment for a young man's evening-at-home in Hap. A tiny suction device in his mouth was gently and soothingly smoking a flip-tip cigarette for him, a fine set of masticators just outside his lips was daintily chewing a creamy nougat-centered candy bar for him and pouring a wonderful nectar into his mouth, the soof-air chair was massaging and relaxing his muscles as he sat, a soothing yet commanding kind of melody was booming through the room, and I'm sure the smells were on, because I saw different colored smoke coming out of little cups. In addition to all this his eyes were enjoying a shape-feast on the picture walls. In short, that young man was about as happy as anyone is ever supposed to be in Brave New Hap.

But when we saw the young wife we hesitated not an instant. She sat all bereft, without a stitch of her pleasure on, as you might say. Her sensation-and-feel gear was strewn about her, as if she had taken it off in a kind of hapless desperation. "Open in the name of the Complaints Service!" Slonk yelled as he beat on an entrance panel with his orange and pink-striped swagger stick. Dreamy and pleasure-stuffed the young husband pressed the button that opened the wall. We poured through and seized him. We took him into the sunlight. We showed him it was spring. We took him and gave him to Kelly. We let Kelly have him for fifteen minutes. We knew Kelly would know what to do.

"How long has this been going on?" asked Slonk, joshing with the young wife, quite a pretty and blue-eyed blonde little thing, in something of an artificial way, however, as women are apt to be in Brave New Hap, let's admit it.

"Oh, generally it's O.K.," she said. "I mean, usually it's fine for him to just be in his pleasure rig. But, well - " - she seemed delightfully embarrassed - "it is spring, you know. And I felt so funny when I stripped out of my pleasure suit this morning. And in the spring a young man's fancy is supposed to - well, you know about that. Isn't it?"

We did know. We did know, indeed! So we turned Kelly up a few

notches higher on what we knew Kelly was doing to that young man. When we opened the panel, Kelly coughed him out, and he looked like he had been through a massage, among other things. He looked like he had muscles. He looked like a lover. He ran to snip some tin flowers and came rushing to his love. "I do love you," he said solidly and completely. We watched at the door. They went inside, the door closed and we rushed for the portholes. We saw them kiss, once, very very gently. And then he climbed back into his pleasure apparatus and went ahead with the shape show! "Gott tam," I heard Slonk mutter. The wife slipped into her own pleasure things and turned to her special color show on the other side of the wall, and Slonk in a kind of cold dismay cursed twice before he screamed, "Open again, in the name of the Complaints Service!"

They both came to the panel this time and Slonk snarled at the wife, "Why did you let him get back into his pleasure rig, without anything happening?"

She, dreamy and pleasure-stuffed already from her color wall and all the rest of it, said, "It did happen. Flowers! And he said he loved me. He kissed me! Didn't he? Ah spring!"

"Vell, Gott tam," Slonk said slowly, sadly and with genuine disgust. Then we seized them both for Kelly. For a full hour we left them both to Kelly, and we outside could only surmise, from our past experience with the Basics and the Specials, what methods of persuasion Kelly was employing to change these two young members of Hap into something approximating human beings again. When they came out they were smiling - hungrily - at each other.

Before we left, looking into a porthole, we could make out two shriveled and empty pleasure suits abandoned on the floor, and hearing little sounds we knew two lovers were together in the spring in another part of the dome. Then Slonk flipped out the periviewer tube, which he has a right to use being a Captain, and ran it up for a look down the top of the dome? "Vell Gott tamm," he said, "with enough prompting from the Complaints Service - " Then one ice-colored eye flapped shut with a sly wink which we understood. "Mission completed," Slonk said crisply, and we climbed into Kelly for the dash back to our station.

Training Talk

It was one of those days when cheer came out of a rubbery sky in great splotches and globs of half-snow and eased down the windowpanes like breakups of little glaciers. I decided it was as good a time as any to talk to them about Geryl.

Little Sister was doing cut-out angels on the floor, her thin mouth a red hyphen of do-or-die centered in the squiggly yellow parenthesis of her raggedy long hair. And Little Brother, muscled like a sweaty boxer, with his shirt off near the fire, was hammering at a train track that got twisted. She was four. He was five.

"Little Sister," I called, "Little Brother. Could you leave off the toys long enough to discuss sense, maybe? You're both growing up, growing up. No doubt about that, no doubt about that." I had turned moody there that winter day, in the soft chair with my pipe lit and my shoes off and my feet stretched tautly toward the electric logs in the mock fireplace that glowed off-fire red. They came and stood before me, trembling slightly in the attention attitude that I insisted on out of respect for me. "Little Brother!" I snapped, "you're not dressed for a conference. Little Sister! your hair's all raggedy." He ran to put his shirt on; she ran to comb her hair.

They were back. "Kids," I said, growing reflective, "do you, either of you, have any idea what really happened to Aunt Geryl?" "She's in heaven!" Little Sister said, and her face glowed with a memory and the beautiful-story-line of the cut-outs she had been doing. "She's dead," Little Brother said forthrightly, "and either In heaven or hell. It's not my place to say. But probably hell." He'd never liked Aunt Geryl. She was

always after him about his toys on the floor, especially the train tracks that seemed to curve everywhere. She and Little Sister had been favorites with each other.

"Where's Mother?"

"Chicago!"

"Los Angeles!"

"Well, you can stop guessing," I said. "It's Kansas City. But who cares? And that wasn't what I called you over about anyway. If it were just Mother you could go on beating your train tracks all afternoon and cut out those silly angels till supper. I wouldn't care. I'd just sit here and let this north-pole stuff slam down on the windowpanes and run down to the ground and form a gray ice blanket from here to the graveyard. Which is what it's doing, in case you hadn't looked. — But I think we all liked Geryl. At any rate, she helped us out...at a tragic tragic time... when your mother — But enough of that! And anyway I think it only fair that we not go into any nonsense about what's happened and where Geryl's gone. — You kids will probably learn as you grow older that I'm a little different from some people. What I mean is, I believe in calling a thing a thing. That is, I don't believe in dressing it up. Especially about my friends. I don't think they should be lied about. People I don't like, people I don't know — all right, dress it up. Say they went to the moon, or Mars, heaven, hell, or star XYZ. I don't care. Why should I?"

"No reason, Pop," Little Brother said.

"You shouldn't care, Daddy," Little Sister said.

"All right! How hungry are you going to be tomorrow? And which do you like best, chicken or boloney? Tomorrow's Sunday, you know."

"CHICKEN!" they both squealed.

"All right! Go get me the boloney then, one of you, out of the cold box. I don't care which one goes. We'll keep the chicken."

Little Brother beat Little Sister in getting started for the boloney. "All right, Little Sister, instead of just standing there you can get me the best two of your angels. She went and after a long time selected her prizes.

When they got back I told them, "All right, we're going to take a little time and do something with this sausage. We're going to carve out a Geryl for each of you, taking our time and making them as nice as we can. Oh, we'll doll them all up! with crepe paper and ribbons and bows and string and maybe even a little hair from that real-hair doll we've been meaning to send to the hospital! We'll probably need both the butcher's knife and the paring knife to do the job right."

They got the knives and I plunged into the boloney skin with the butcher's knife and maneuvered around in there until I had two cylinders of sausage cut out, each about six inches long and an inch or more in diameter. I proceeded to sculpt them to look like Geryl as nearly as I could, long sausage nose, long dishpanhands face, and little short

shaggy-bob hair fixed on. Little Sister and Little Brother watched all the time with interest, exchanging nervous glances with each other now and again and trembling violently once in awhile. My training talks with them were always a little tense, and I could tell they lost weight at such times, but I couldn't help that. A lone parent has the whole load of the training obligation toward his children on his hands.

When the Geryls were ready, as near as I could get them, I said, "All right, you know those two cigar boxes we've been saving that I said might come in handy for a training talk. Get them. We'll line them with shiny paper." When we had the cigar boxes ready, we put the boloney figures in and the gold angels and sealed the lids down with red sealing wax. "Now we have a boloney stick, carved, and a gold angel in each box," I said. "So before the ground starts to freeze," — the rain-snow had taken a turn toward pellety sleet by now — "You chaps just hustle right out and get this stuff under the soil."

They bundled into their winter heavies, took tiny shovels from sand pails and strode into the sling-shot sleet. I watched from the window and saw Little Brother do his burial quickly by a young plum tree. Little Sister, taking more time, did hers in the open and marked it with a stone white with ice.

Little Brother waited patiently for her to finish.

When they came in stamping and wheezing and all fired up with the cold, I told them simply, from my usual iceberg distance of dignity, "You may each go back to your own kettle tendings and pot watchings now — whatever you were doing before, I mean. In about six months we'll try to get together on this thing again, dig into these burials and finish up this training talk about Aunt Geryl. We'll reach a conclusion about what really happened to her, where she's gone, the efficacy of heaven and hell, the Promise and all that. Or we'll certainly try to."

Little Sister went listlessly back to her angels, and Little Brother seemed old — old, going for his train track....

When six months had gone by on the boloney sticks and the angels and it was May, green May, we went to open the caskets. "WHERE'S MOTHER?" I yelled to the children suddenly and without warning as we strolled above the green grave sites of our serious grim keen experiments before we started to dig. "New Orleans!" Little Sister cried, and Little Brother guessed "Boston!" "WHO CARES?" I raved back. It's neither of those hell places, and I wouldn't have asked you except I glanced and saw a black heavy heart up there on those two tiny limbs in that elm tree, and I spoke without volition. And never mind that big word, volition. Just say that I spoke without meaning to. Just say that the spring sometimes bemuses one until he is unguardful; all brainwashed to gid-

diness and standing caught with his words down — he knows not —

"LET'S DIG!" We fell to delving then where Little Sister had buried her Geryl and, after about five seconds of spading fast and tossing, my spade all at once fell on a hollow thuddy noise. I sprang forward to claw with my hands, and soon I lifted the box forth. Then I dropped it.

There was a rattling sound! There was a slithery and slathery sound, there was a rasping, like rope being pulled through crushed paper. The box lived! It lived?? Out of one carved boloney stick and a little girl's gold angel something had hatched!! Something had hatched??? WHAT had hatched!!!!

For a moment I stood in awe while sunlight flooded the falsely pleasant world of May and that queer dry sound of slithering continued in the cigar box that was our training-talk casket. Then, recovering my sure knowledge of the world and casting awe to the ground, I cautiously shattered the wax that sealed our casket lid shut and, using the spade for my safety, I pried open the box.

"Kill it! Father, kill it! Don't let it get away!" Little Brother shrieked, and he jigged, and he held his nose from the sausage that was now well over six months of age.

"My cut-out! He's done a nest in my cut-out!" Little Sister cried and jumped, and then she clutched her nose and her chest and went still and white-faced as cathedral statuary.

But I stood brave with heavy hands, as stones, while we looked at each other, measured each other steadily. It had two sharp cold eyes in a head shaped like the forthwith end of a spear. It hoisted a calm slick-stick part of itself upon three circles of chill, and it weaved the spear-head there in the sunny air of May, a wedge that I could not stop regarding. Then noiselessly it left, not even rattling the angel, deftly unslung from its orbs and, feeding the straightening circles over the side of the box, slipped itself to the ground.

"We'll all come back tomorrow!" I yelled. "This is all for today!" I cried. "We'll try to draw some conclusions. Later. We'll dig — we'll spade — we'll bring up Little Brother's casket! We'll assess." And suddenly, my legs going to jelly-mush and water, I sat hurriedly down to the freshly-dug ground. I hand-waved the children from me, told them to go do some kind of games, while I watched a thing that I thought was going deeper into the safety and gloom of the cold and dark-turned soil. Then quite unexpectedly at the edge of an especially large clod I had turned in the early digging it brought up its head, and it looked at me for a cold instant from its camouflage, almost the color of wet soil. Then, breaking for open ground, it glided into the emerald grass of May and completely disappeared from my straining eyes, leaving me to my fears and my fresh confusions. But it was scared! I clung to that thought. It knew it had met a master.

Idly, weakly, I reached for the training-talk casket, my thoughts struck numb with wonderment. I had problems. Yes, real problems now. What miracle? What dark miracle? How into the box, the carefully sealed box? What's to know? And what's ever to know after this? And then my eyes fell upon it. Oh the saving of all the cold judgements. What joy! At a corner of the box there was a place of warping – the glue had given way, the short nails had been bested – caused, no doubt, by dampness in the soil. A hole gaped there, quite small, but big! big as the world....

But my joy was short-lived and my extreme relief cut down to its death almost before its real birthing. In my mind that night, thinking and thinking, I knew, yes, KNEW! that such a snake, if it was a snake – such a creature – had never been seen in that part of the country before. I could hardly wait for next day. YES! What strange sign might we not find to help us in the very next training-talk casket....

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I'll confess something here. Back in the 1960's, when many of these stories were first appearing in the SF magazines, I was one of the many fans who thought David Bunch was writing them to show contempt for his readers. Some time later, I sampled them again out of curiosity, and then went on a binge of Bunch, discovering that the superficiality had been all my own, that here was an original, skilled, and fascinating voice, a writer whose stories required some exertion on the part of the reader, but who rewarded those efforts. Some of the best of these, including my personal favorite, "That High-up Blue Day That Saw the Black Sky-train Come Spinning" are collected here, along with several I've never encountered before. Not for the lazy reader, but definitely for those with the desire to be stimulated and entertained.

— Don D'Ammassa, *Science Fiction Chronicle*

David R. Bunch's short, idiosyncratic stories have, almost invariably, been met with varying degrees of outrage from readers unwilling to work with his convoluted prose to reach the plot that to most is opaque. In his own way, Bunch is one of the most original and creative writers in the genre, and it is unfortunate that the conservative bent of most readers is such that he is not given the attention he deserves.

— 20th Century Science-Fiction Writers

I'm not in this business primarily to describe or explain or entertain. I'm here to make the reader think, even if I have to bash his teeth out, break his legs, grind him up, beat him down, and totally chastise him for the terrible and tinsel and almost wholly bad world we allow.... The first level reader, who wants to see events jerk their tawdry ways through some used and USED old plot — I love him with a hate bigger than all the world's pity, but he's not for me. The reader I want is the one who wants the anguish, who will go up there and get on that big black cross. And that reader will have, with me, the saving grace of knowing that some awful payment is due...as all space must look askance at us, all galaxies send star frowns down, a cosmic leer envelop this small ball that has such great Great GREAT pretenders.

— David R. Bunch



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